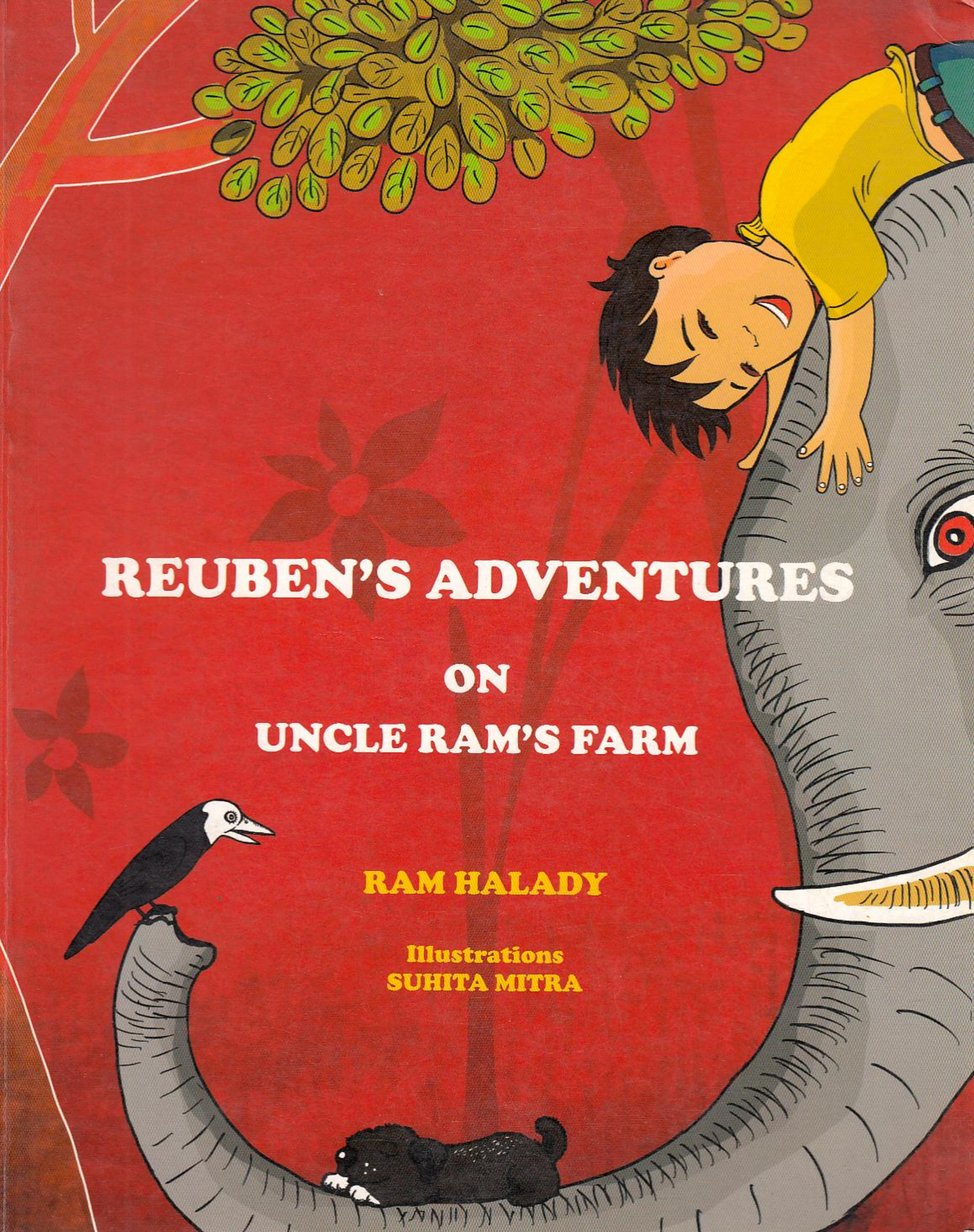




REUBEN'S ADVENTURES

ON
UNCLE RAM'S FARM

RAM HALADY

Illustrations
SUHITA MITRA



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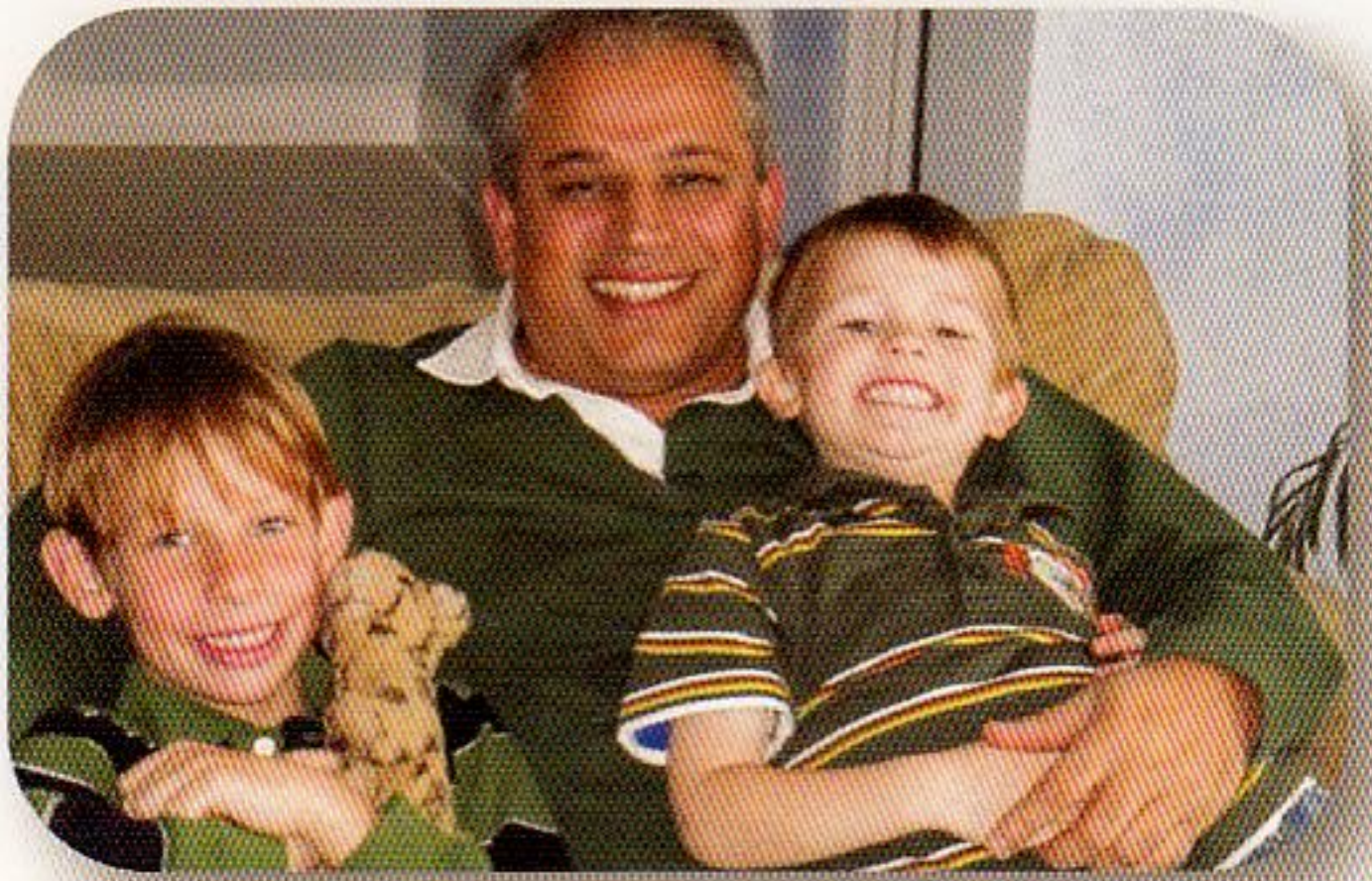
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To my beloved grandfather
~ my first storyteller





ABOUT THE STORYTELLER

For **RAM HALADY**, it all started as a hobby. He began writing entertaining stories for his nephews, Reuben and Andrew. It was a happy revelation for himself, that he could write short stories for children. It also provided him with a wonderful escape from his business and professional life as a consultant to a software company.

Although Ram relocated from India to Chicago almost 20 years ago, he carried with him fond, childhood memories of visiting his uncle's farm. In each of us, there lives a child who longs to have adventures with unusual pets, but safe within the circle of a protective and loving family. Ram and his wife Jeanne, sometimes fantasize about settling on a farm in India, complete with a roaming elephant which the villagers would love to feed... So Ram based his stories on a real family, at his imaginary farm in India - right next to a forest where there was no shortage of animals or adventure. He put the children in charge of this world, assisted by animals that could communicate, especially with them.

This is Ram's first attempt at writing and publishing a collection of short stories for children. In these tales, Reuben and Andrew visit their uncle's farm; gain exposure to different animals in the course of their adventures - and learn many things along the way...

Ram Halady can be reached at: haladyrj@yahoo.com



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Reuben Gets A Pet Elephant



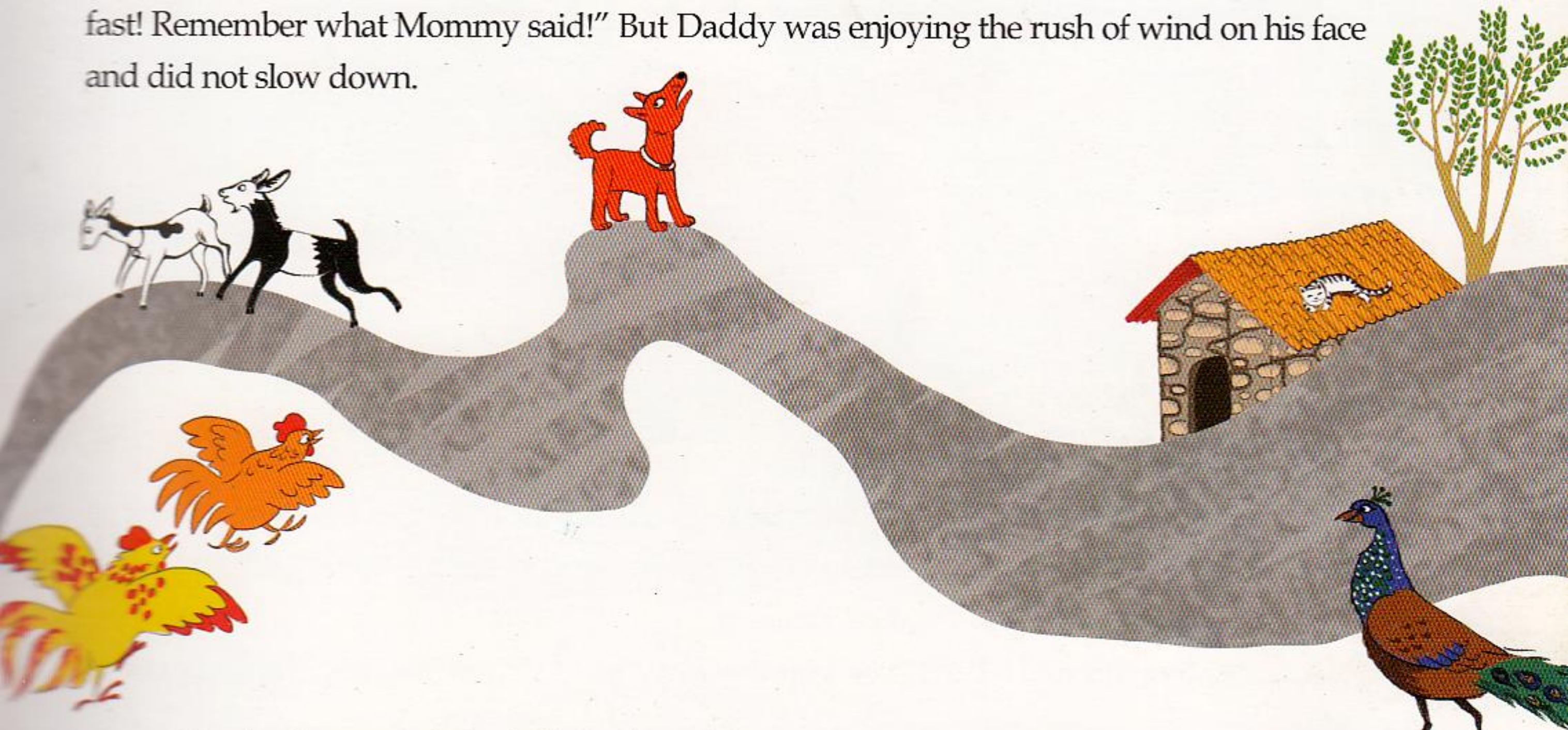
Five-year-old Reuben was most excited. He was flying with his parents from Milwaukee, United States, to Bangalore, India – where Uncle Ram and Aunt Jeanne had a farm. He was going to bike all summer with Daddy! He could hardly wait for the long plane ride to end.

When he got there, Uncle Ram and Aunt Jeanne were all smiles as he hugged them. Daddy promised to take him biking the next day. As Reuben went to sleep, he thought “Boy, this is going to be one fun vacation!”

The next morning, as Reuben and Daddy left on their bike, Mommy waved them off with “Be CAREFUL!”

While Daddy steered the bike, Reuben sat smiling in the back and looking around with wide, enchanted eyes. He saw lots of animals and birds – goats, cows, dogs, cats, chickens and even a peacock. They took the scenic route through the paddy fields and went up the hill which stood close by.

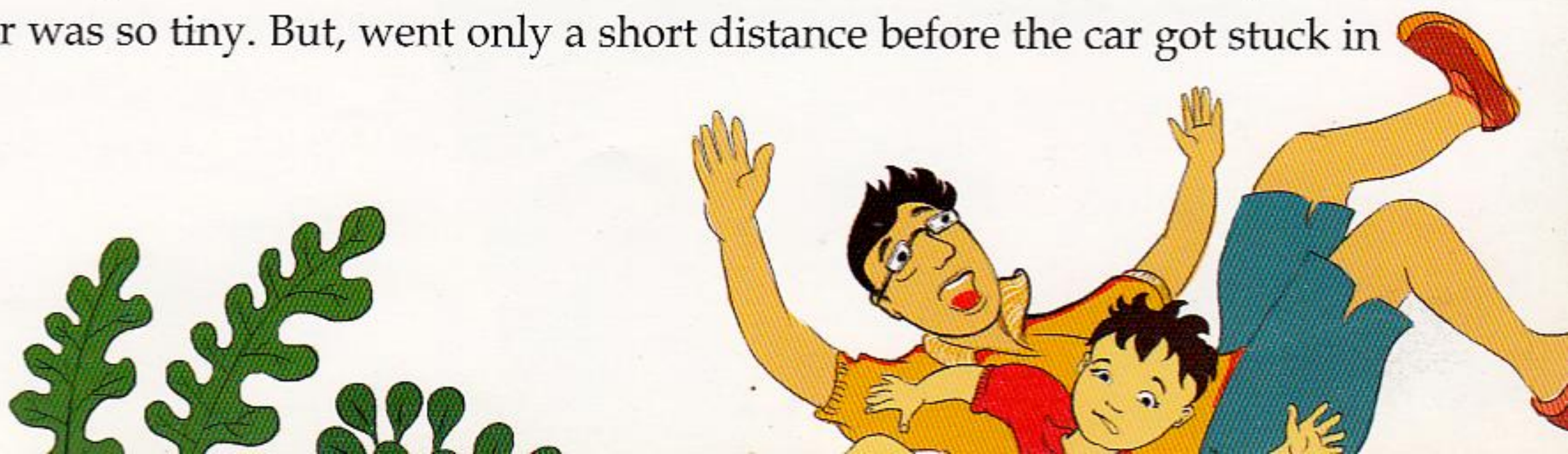
As they turned and started down the hill, Reuben cried out, "Daddy, you are going too fast! Remember what Mommy said!" But Daddy was enjoying the rush of wind on his face and did not slow down.



At the bottom of the hill, he hit a large rock with a thud! Down went Daddy first and Reuben landed on Daddy's stomach.

Although Reuben was unhurt, Daddy had sprained his ankle in the tumble. As best as he could, Reuben helped Daddy limp painfully to the shade of a tree and sit down. He looked around but there was no one in sight. He wondered what he could do to help his Dad.

After some time, he saw a car come by and frantically waved at it to stop. Fortunately, it was the village Headman with his daughter, Gowri. They helped Daddy onto the backseat and put the bike on top of the car. Poor Daddy had to stretch his feet out through one window as the car was so tiny. But, went only a short distance before the car got stuck in the mud.



Reuben turned to Gowri and asked, "What do we do now?"

Gowri instantly replied, "Only Lakshmi can help us now."

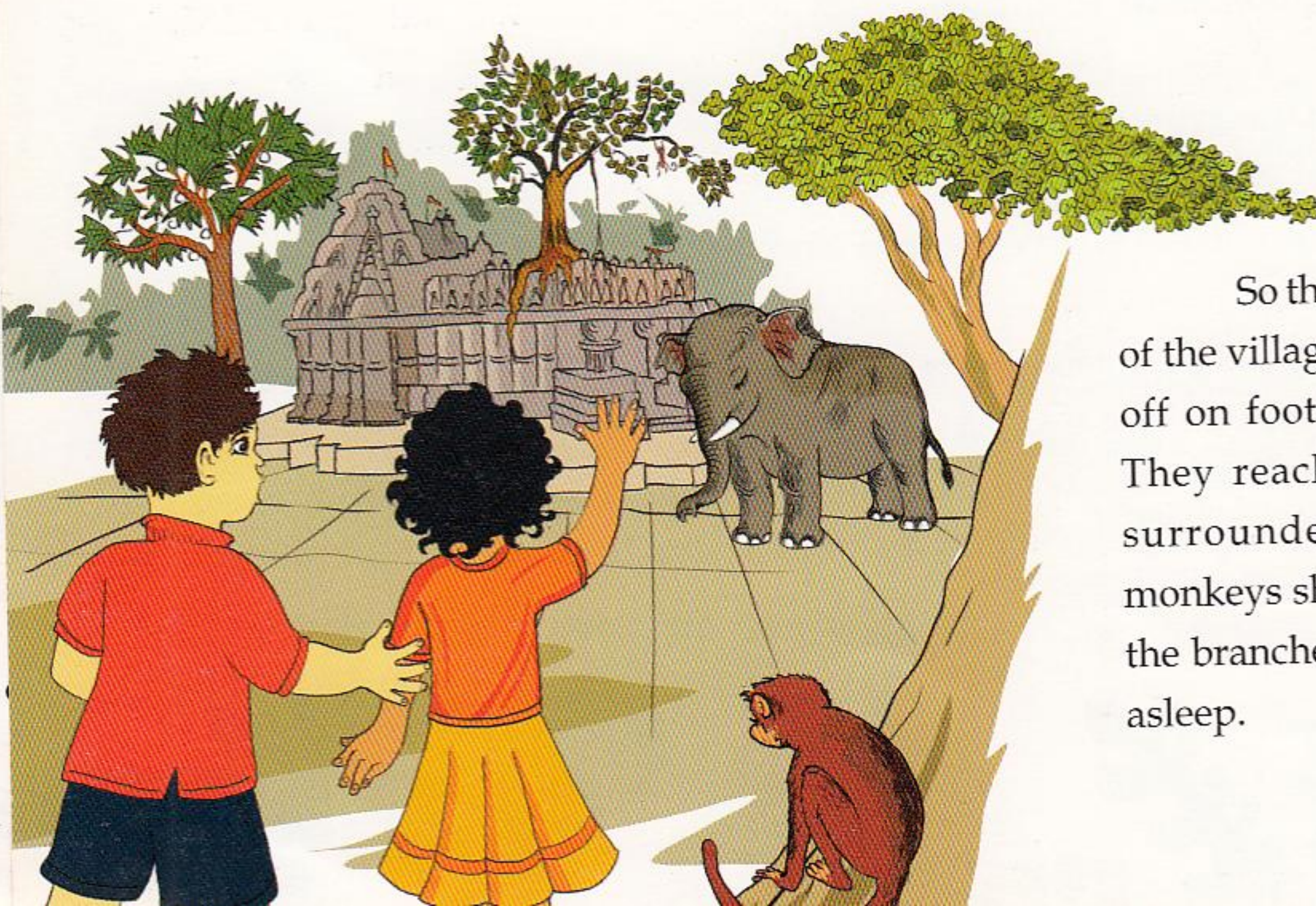


"Who is Lakshmi?" enquired Reuben.

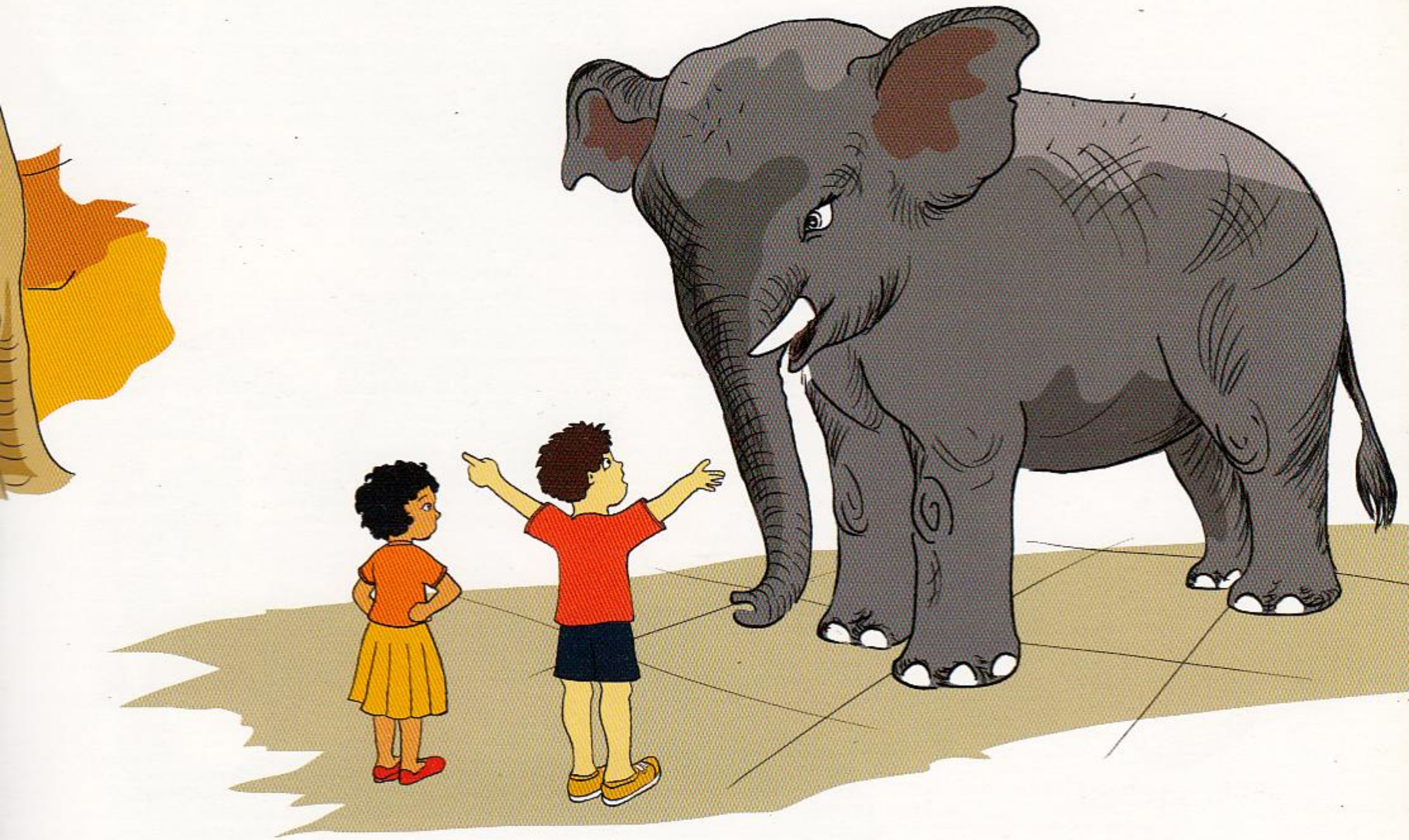
"Lakshmi is an elephant, who stays by the temple ruins. She can push the car out of the mud easily. But she doesn't listen to anyone. Why don't you try talking to her?"

"How far is the temple?" asked Reuben.

"It is not too far and I can show you the way," said Gowri, eagerly climbing out of the car.



So they left Daddy in the care of the village Headman and started off on foot in search of Lakshmi. They reached the temple ruins, surrounded by tall trees with monkeys shrieking and jumping in the branches - and found Lakshmi asleep.



Reuben called out, "Lakshmi!" but she did not even open her eyes. Reuben had seen elephants at the zoo back at home in Milwaukee, but never this close and unenclosed. He went right up to the huge, grey, sleeping form and whispered into one large ear, "Lakshmi, wake up! It is me, Reuben – I need you!" Lakshmi reluctantly opened one eye and looked at him.

"My Dad is hurt and the car is stuck in the mud. Will you help us please....?" he pleaded. Lakshmi opened both eyes, sat up, flapped her large ears and considered Reuben. He looked like a well-mannered boy. But still she did not budge.

Reuben did not know what to do next. "Lakshmi, if you help us, I will take you home and you can be my very own pet elephant! We'll have so much fun together!" he finally promised.



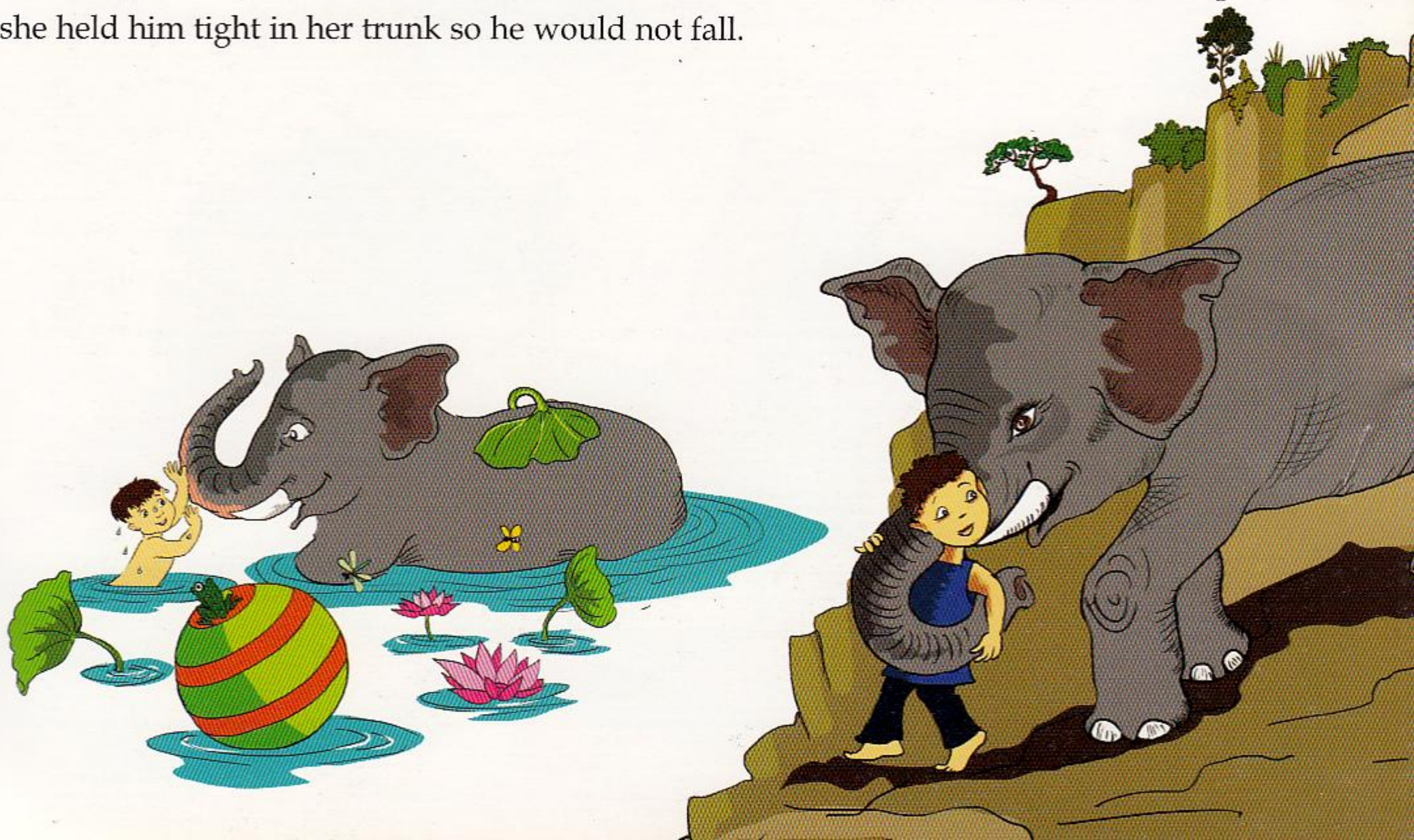
Lakshmi was thrilled to hear this. Nobody had ever offered to have her as their pet in the past. She stood up, nodded her head in agreement and lifted both Reuben and Gowri onto her back with one movement of her trunk. Before he knew it, Reuben was sitting on top of Lakshmi's big back and looking around him like a maharaja. But Gowri quickly directed Lakshmi where to go and soon reached the car.

With her powerful head and long trunk, Lakshmi bulldozed the car out of the mud as easily as if it were a toy! When they finally arrived back at the farm, everyone was alarmed to hear what had happened but glad that Reuben and Gowri had saved the day with Lakshmi's help.

Daddy apologized to Reuben saying, "I should have listened to your Mommy. I am sorry I won't be able to go biking with you for some time till the ankle heals."

"Don't worry Daddy, I have Lakshmi now," he replied excitedly with a wide grin on his face.

Thus began their friendship. For the rest of the summer, Lakshmi and Reuben were always together. They played football and went swimming in the pond close by. When Reuben got tired, Lakshmi carried him on her back. When they went up or down slopes, she held him tight in her trunk so he would not fall.



The days went by so quickly. Reuben could not believe it was already time to go back home to the States. He asked Mommy, "How many seats will Lakshmi need on the plane? Can she sit next to me?"

But Mommy only ruffled his hair and said, "We can't take Lakshmi, Reuben; she won't fit in the plane!"

Reuben was shocked! Leave Lakshmi behind? But before he could protest, Aunt Jeanne came to the rescue, "Reuben, you can leave Lakshmi with us. She will be here when you come back for your next vacation. She will be waiting for you."

Reuben nodded his head sadly and went slowly outside. He put his arms around Lakshmi, "Is that okay my friend?" Lakshmi hugged him back with her trunk and slowly nodded her head.

"I love you and will never forget you," Reuben promised.

Before they left the farm, Uncle Ram took a picture of everyone with Lakshmi. Back in Milwaukee, Reuben framed the photograph and put it in his bedroom.

Reuben went back to school and shared his adventures with everyone. He became the most popular boy in his class. No one else had a pet elephant!



Reuben Gets A Storyteller



Reuben had just turned six and was visiting Uncle Ram's farm near Bangalore once again during his school holidays. He played all day long with Lakshmi, his pet elephant. But when it was time to go to bed, he missed his story books. In his excitement he had forgotten to pack them.

Reuben opened the window by his bed and peeked out. He saw Uncle Ram sitting under a tree with a bowl of peanuts. What was he doing? The next morning, Reuben asked Uncle Ram about it.

"What did you see?" asked Uncle Ram.

"I saw you with a bowl of peanuts," answered Reuben perplexed.

"Did you see anything else?" Uncle Ram asked with a twinkle in his eye and a little smile turning his mouth up.

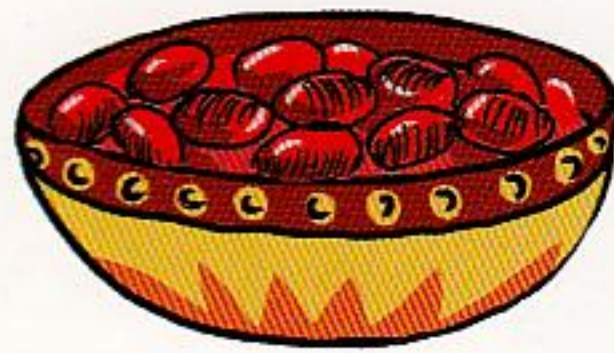
"No" replied Reuben. "What else was there to see?"

"Maybe someday you will," replied Uncle Ram mysteriously.

A few days later, Uncle Ram informed Reuben that he was going away for three days on farm work. "Would you like to keep the bowl of peanuts meanwhile?" he asked smiling.

"Yes, of course!" Reuben was quick to answer. "But what do I have to do with it?"

"Just leave it by your bedside window before you go to sleep," said Uncle Ram and walked away without saying anything more.



That night, Reuben filled the bowl with salted peanuts, placed it on his window sill, and waited. Nothing happened. Reuben was just falling off to sleep disappointed when he heard a tap on his window. Jumping out of bed, he opened the window wide and saw a huge crow with a white head.

To his utter astonishment, the crow said, "Do you have any peanuts for me?"

"You can talk!" exclaimed Reuben amazed. "Yes, I have peanuts. But who are you?"

"I am Pasha, the Storyteller," announced the bird.

"What stories do you tell?" asked Reuben his eyes as wide as saucers. Sleep seemed to have flown out the open window.

"What do you like to hear about?" Pasha took a mouthful of peanuts with his huge beak.



"I like fairy tales and animal stories best of all," said Reuben.

"What would you like to do when you grow up?" Pasha munched on more peanuts.

"Play!" said Reuben with a delighted laugh.

"Good! Playing is what keeps one young. But, what do you want to *become*?" Pasha asked again.

"Oh, I want to become a cop!" announced Reuben.

"Why? Do you like guns?" was Pasha's next question.

"No, but I want to catch bad people. Besides, I can ride fast cars then," said Reuben excitedly.

"Mmm...you seem like a good boy. I will tell you stories on one condition," said Pasha. "You cannot tell any grown-ups. They cannot see or hear me."

"What about Lakshmi?"

"You can tell Lakshmi, all animals are able to see and hear me," said Pasha, nodding his head wisely.

And that is how Pasha became Reuben's *storyteller*. Pasha told him the story of Rama, the beloved king, with his monkey army. Reuben listened with great attention, his blanket wrapped around him.

The next day, Reuben awoke to find the empty bowl, so he knew that he had not imagined it all. Reuben repeated the story to Lakshmi, who enjoyed it too.

On the second night, Pasha continued the story, describing how the monkey army helped Rama build a bridge over the ocean to fight bad people in the land of Lanka. Such a fantastic tale, thought Reuben, watching Pasha speak and munch his peanuts. Reuben fell asleep only to wake next morning and find the empty bowl on the window sill.

On the third night, Reuben found Pasha waiting for him with a grim look on his face.





"What is wrong?" asked Reuben.

"I have some bad news for you, Reuben," said Pasha. "I heard some thieves talking about robbing the temple jewels tonight."

"Uncle Ram is not here. Should we call the cops?" asked Reuben.

"No. Remember, no grown-ups would believe it as they cannot see or hear me," Pasha reminded him.

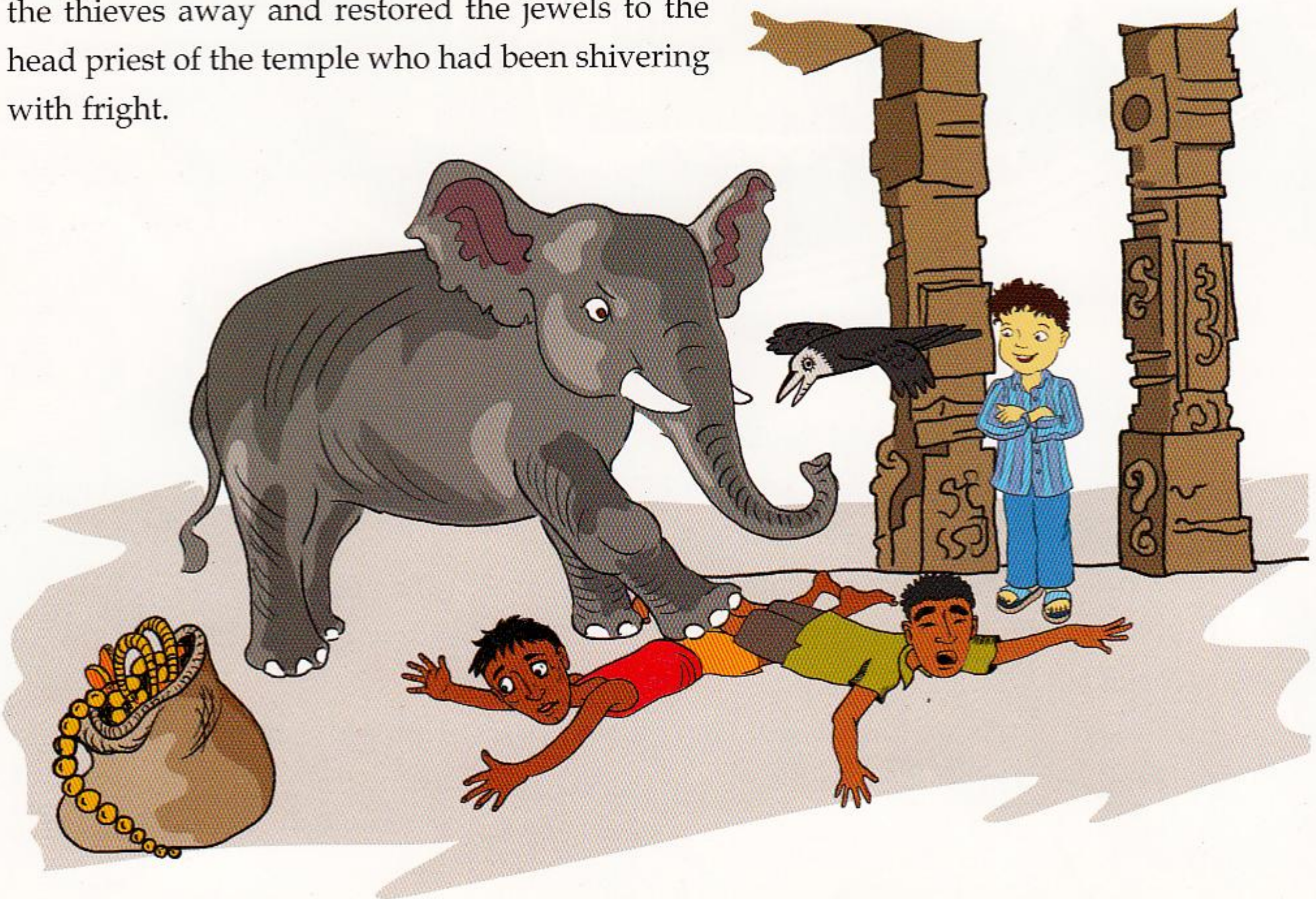
"But we must stop the thieves! I have an idea – let us go with Lakshmi," suggested Reuben and Pasha agreed.

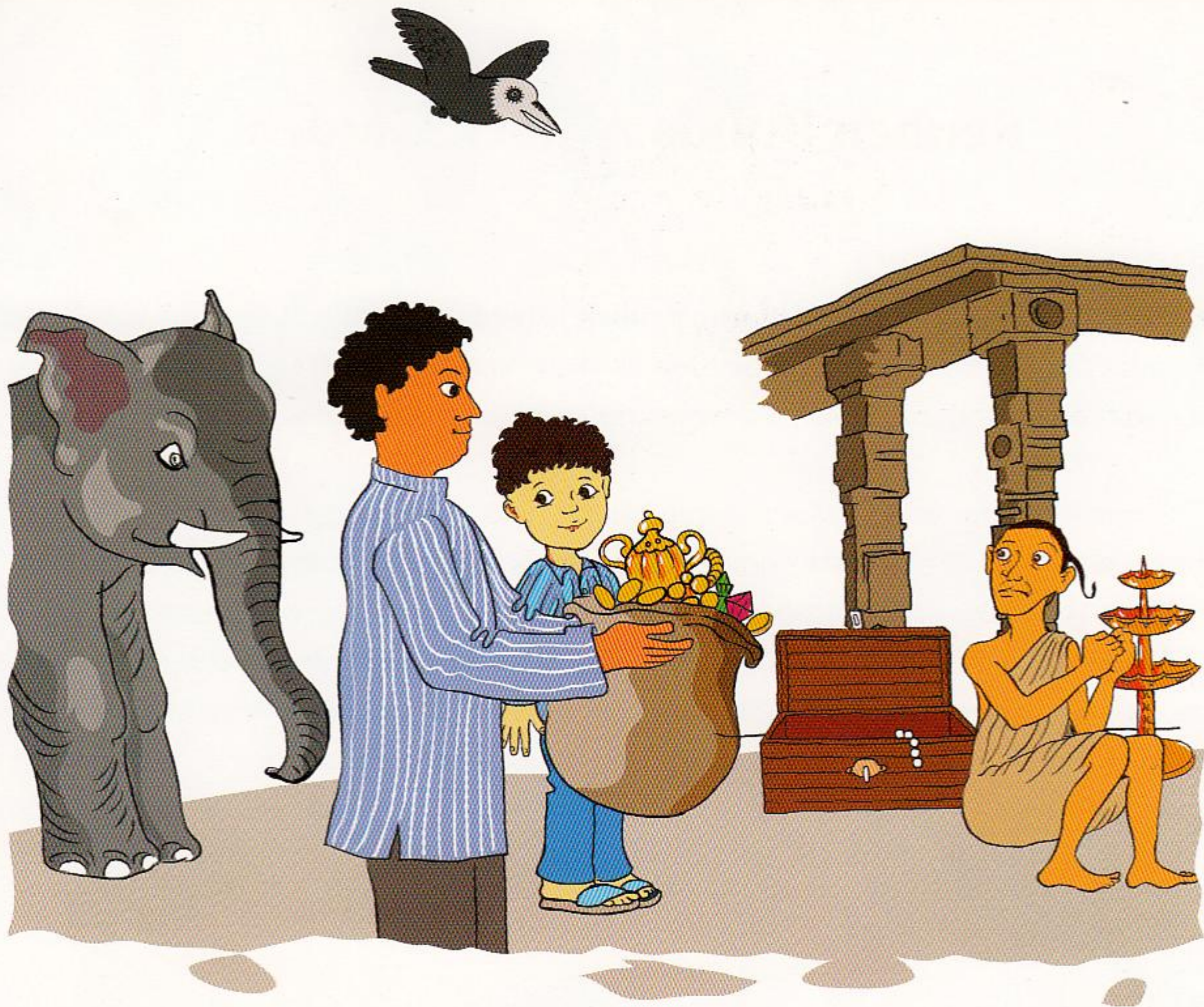


Reuben left a note for Uncle Ram. Then he called Lakshmi and explained the situation. Pasha flew on ahead and Lakshmi followed with Reuben on her back.

When they got to the temple, they saw two thieves carrying away two bundles with the jewels. But as soon as the thieves saw an angry elephant charging at them, they dropped everything and tried to run. But Lakshmi quickly threw out her long trunk and caught them. She then pinned them down on the ground with one large foot. Reuben hurried into the temple grounds, found some coconut coir rope and tied them up.

To Reuben's relief, Uncle Ram arrived just then with the police. He had read Reuben's note upon returning from his trip and immediately alerted the police. They took the thieves away and restored the jewels to the head priest of the temple who had been shivering with fright.





Reuben and Lakshmi became even more popular in the village. The next night, Reuben asked Pasha, "I am still puzzled. You say no grown-ups can see or hear you. But then, how is it that Uncle Ram can?"

"My dear Reuben, Uncle Ram is still a boy at heart," laughed Pasha fondly. "That is why I tell him stories every night."

Reuben closed his eyes and fell asleep with a smile on his face. Pasha flew away, leaving behind the empty bowl of peanuts.



Reuben Builds A Rock Garden

During his stay at Uncle Ram's farm, Reuben helped out with watering the plants and trees. This took a great deal of time as there was greenery all around. One day, Reuben asked Uncle Ram "Do all the trees and plants need a lot of water?"

Uncle Ram replied, "No, Guava trees don't. Also, flowering plants like Canna, Lily, Plumeria and Red Cultivars, do well with just a little water – even during the hot summer."

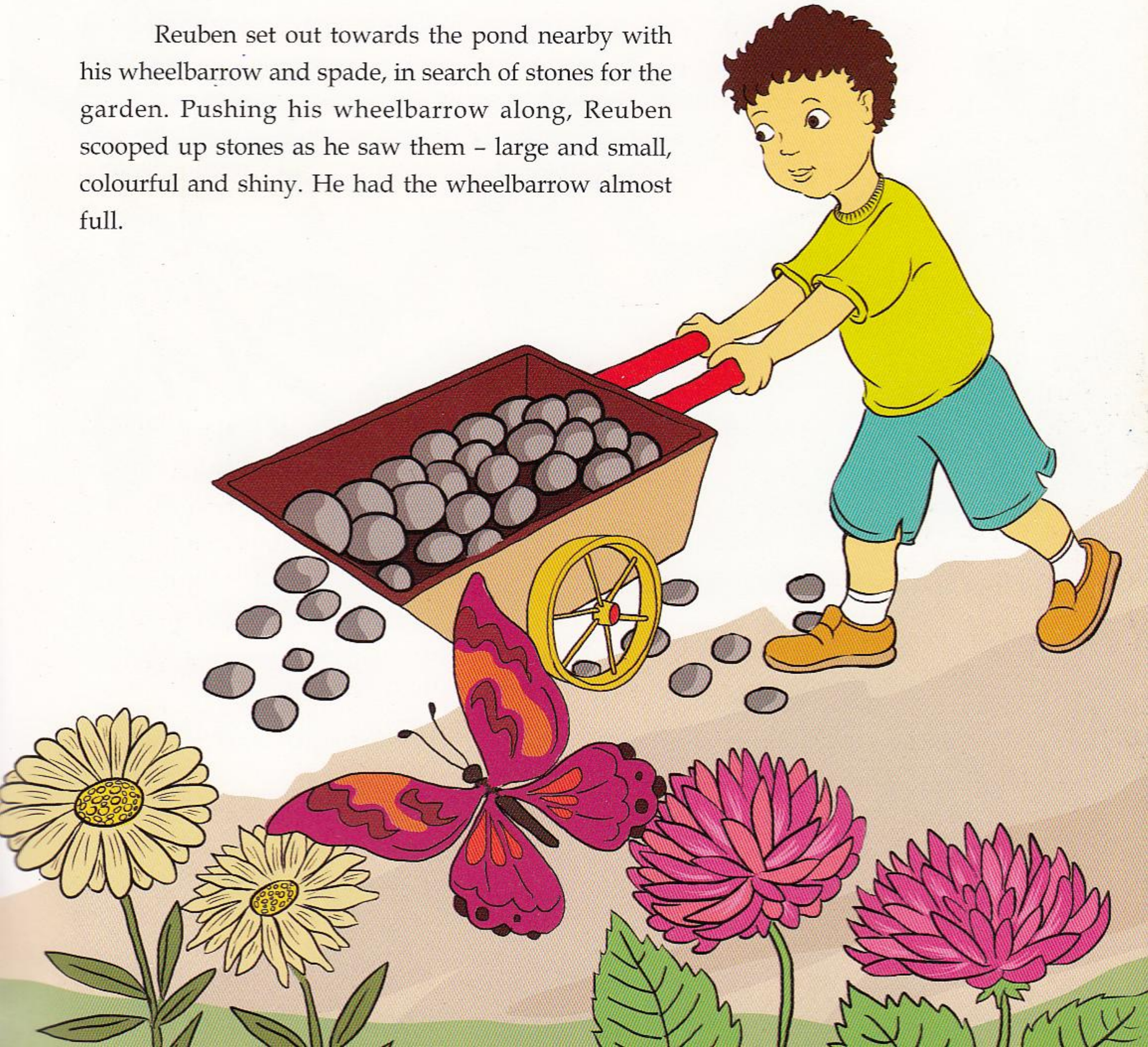
"Can we build a small garden with these?" asked Reuben.

"That is a great idea. I will help you build a *Rock Garden*," said Uncle Ram enthusiastically. "I will get the plants and trees ready. Can you find some stones for the garden?"





Reuben set out towards the pond nearby with his wheelbarrow and spade, in search of stones for the garden. Pushing his wheelbarrow along, Reuben scooped up stones as he saw them – large and small, colourful and shiny. He had the wheelbarrow almost full.



As he got to the pond, he noticed a big shiny one. But, as he got closer, he realized that it was not a stone at all but a crocodile! To his surprise, the crocodile turned away and hid under the water. Why?



Reuben edged close to the water. He could see the crocodile just under the surface. "Why did you run away?" Reuben asked him.

"You have a wheelbarrow full of stones. I thought you were going to throw stones at me like the other children in the village do," replied the crocodile cautiously.

"I would never throw stones at you!" exclaimed Reuben shocked. "Will you please come out?"

The crocodile slowly lifted his head out of the water and then waddled on to the land. He was about 20 feet long, with a huge jaw and long tail. He had short but powerful limbs.

"Why do they throw stones at you?" asked Reuben puzzled.

"They think I am ugly and mean. That makes them afraid of me," replied the crocodile sadly.

"That is not true! You are handsome and strong. You have such powerful hands and big jaws," said Reuben. "You move fast like a boxer. Can I call you Ali?"

The crocodile broke into an enormous smile, showing all his teeth. And that is how Reuben struck up a friendship with Ali, the crocodile.

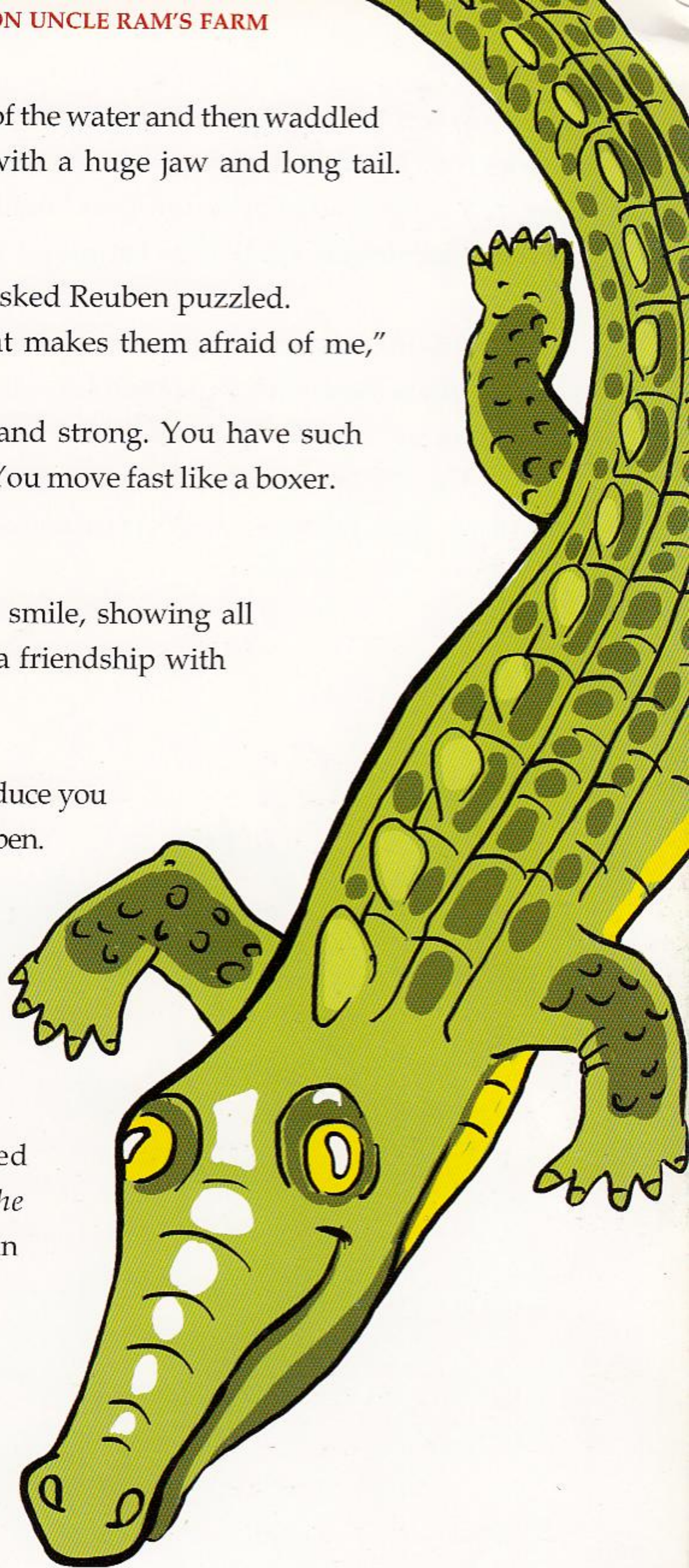
"Come with me to the village. I will introduce you to my friends. They won't hurt you" invited Reuben.

Ali was not sure at first, but Reuben looked like a nice boy. Ali decided to trust him. So, they started towards the village.

The moment they entered the village, the children playing outside started screaming at the sight of them, "*Eeeee. The Crocodile is back! Get some stones!*" They all ran around frantically collecting stones.

"What happens now?" asked Ali anxiously.

"Don't worry," said Reuben and calmed Ali down by putting his arms around him. "Things have a way of working out don't they?"



When the children came and gathered around in a circle, armed with whatever stones they could find, they saw Reuben with his arms around the crocodile. They could see that Reuben was not afraid. They could also see that Reuben was safe – the crocodile did not hurt him at all. Was he harmless? They became curious and came closer.

“Reuben, can we touch him too?” asked one of the children.

“Sure. This is Ali, my friend,” Reuben said with a wave of his hand.

The children slowly came closer and some even reached out to touch Ali gently on his head. They were awed at his size and strength.



Finally, the boy nearest Ali said, "You are so handsome and beautiful! We are sorry we threw stones at you before. Will you forgive us?"

Ali was so happy to hear the children apologize. He nodded his head up and down, up and down. They became his friends too.

Now the village children had a problem. What should they do with all the stones they had collected? Reuben had an idea. "I can use them in my Rock Garden," he told them and explained how Uncle Ram and he were building one at the farm.



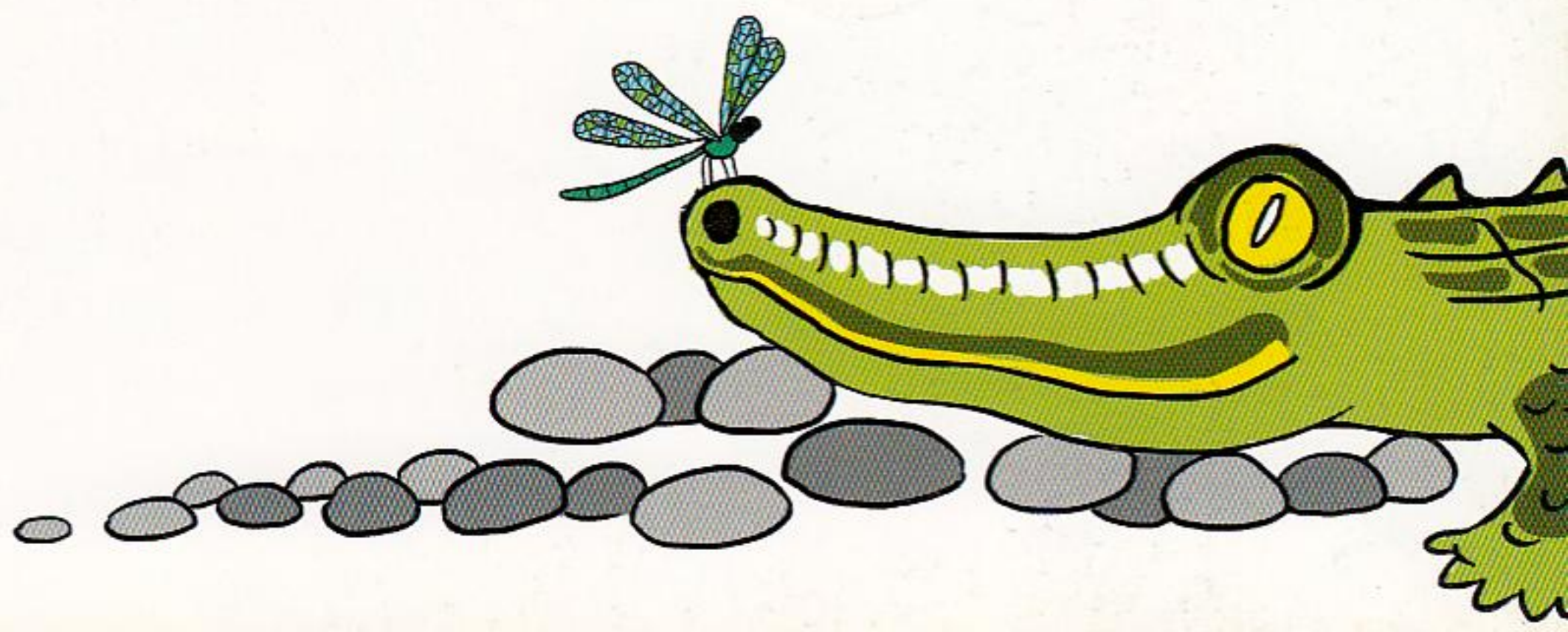


So everyone followed Reuben and Ali to Uncle Ram's farm. Now they had all the stones they would need to build a Rock Garden.

Uncle Ram had already dug holes for the tree and had everything ready. They all helped Reuben and Uncle Ram plant the Guava tree in the centre, surrounded with rows of flowering plants. They planted some herbs too, throughout the garden. They used the stones to border the flowerbeds and build stone paths. The garden was finally finished and it looked beautiful.

But they still had some extra stones left. What could they do with them? So they made a stone bed for Ali, where he could sunbathe anytime he felt like visiting them, as he was no longer afraid of the village children throwing stones at him.

That was how Reuben built the Rock Garden at Uncle Ram's farm. If you happen to visit the farm, you might chance upon Ali, the crocodile, sunning himself in the Rock Garden. If you do, he will be most happy to make friends with you too.



Reuben & Andrew Help Spots

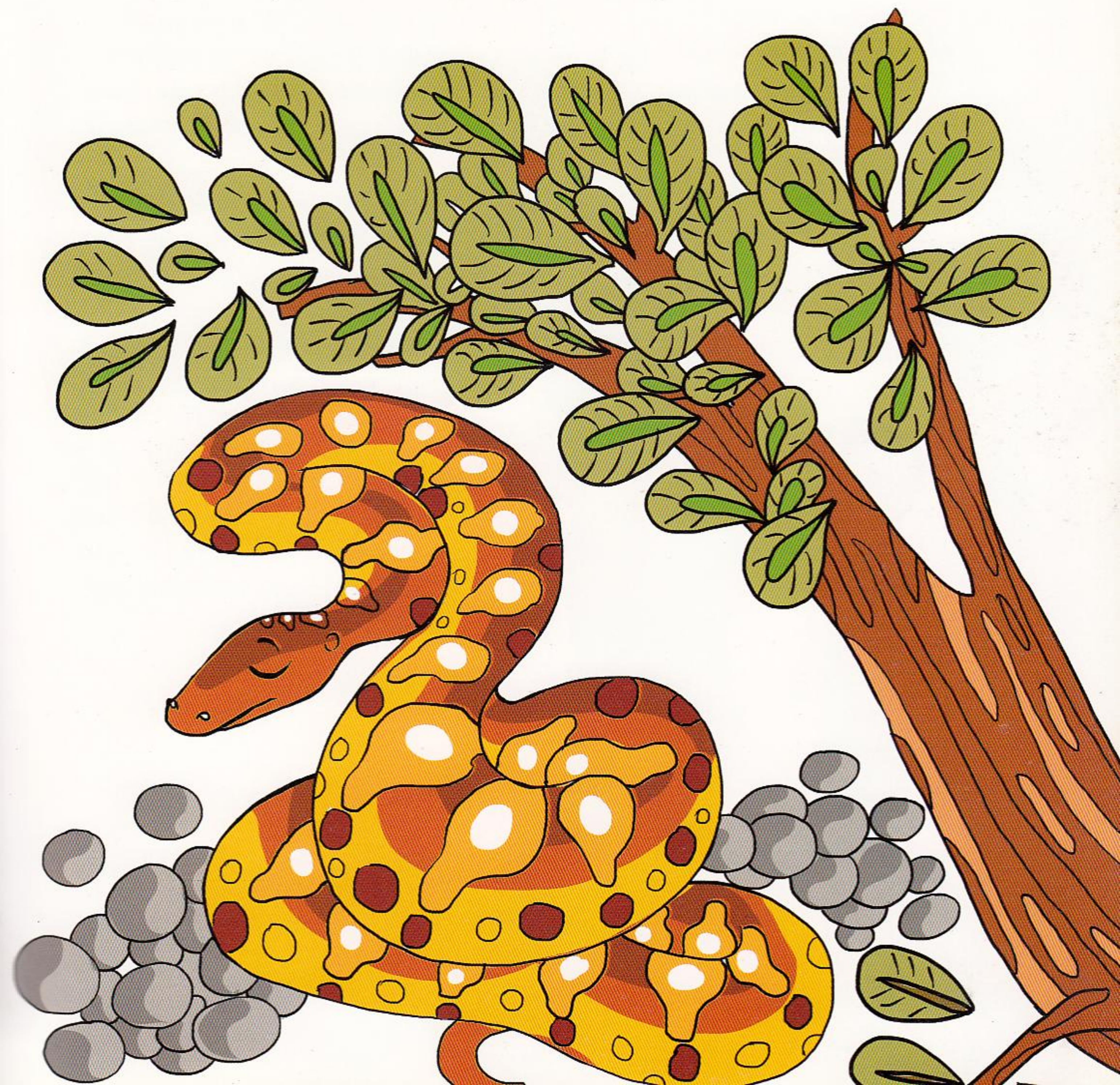


Reuben was glad his cousin Andrew had come to visit them at Uncle Ram's farm. Andrew, who had lived with his parents in China for the last three years, was stopping over for a few days before going on to Cincinnati in the US. Andrew had long hair and usually wore a red baseball cap. Reuben liked Andrew a lot and they played together much of the time.

One day, they came upon a huge python by the Guava tree in the *Rock Garden*. Could this be the Great Python the villagers feared, for the safety of their farm animals? Could this be the same snake that the children were warned about – behave or else.....? What was the python doing here?

Like Uncle Ram, Reuben was scared of snakes. But Andrew was not and knew all about them. He whispered to Reuben, "Don't be afraid. Pythons are deaf and mute. They don't hurt children."

The cousins crept closer. The snake was at least 50 feet long. He had shiny scales with brown spots. He lay coiled up with his eyes closed. He had a huge bulge in the middle of his body. And he was moaning! Was he in pain? Could he talk?



Andrew called out, "Hello, are you all right? I am Andrew and this is Reuben."

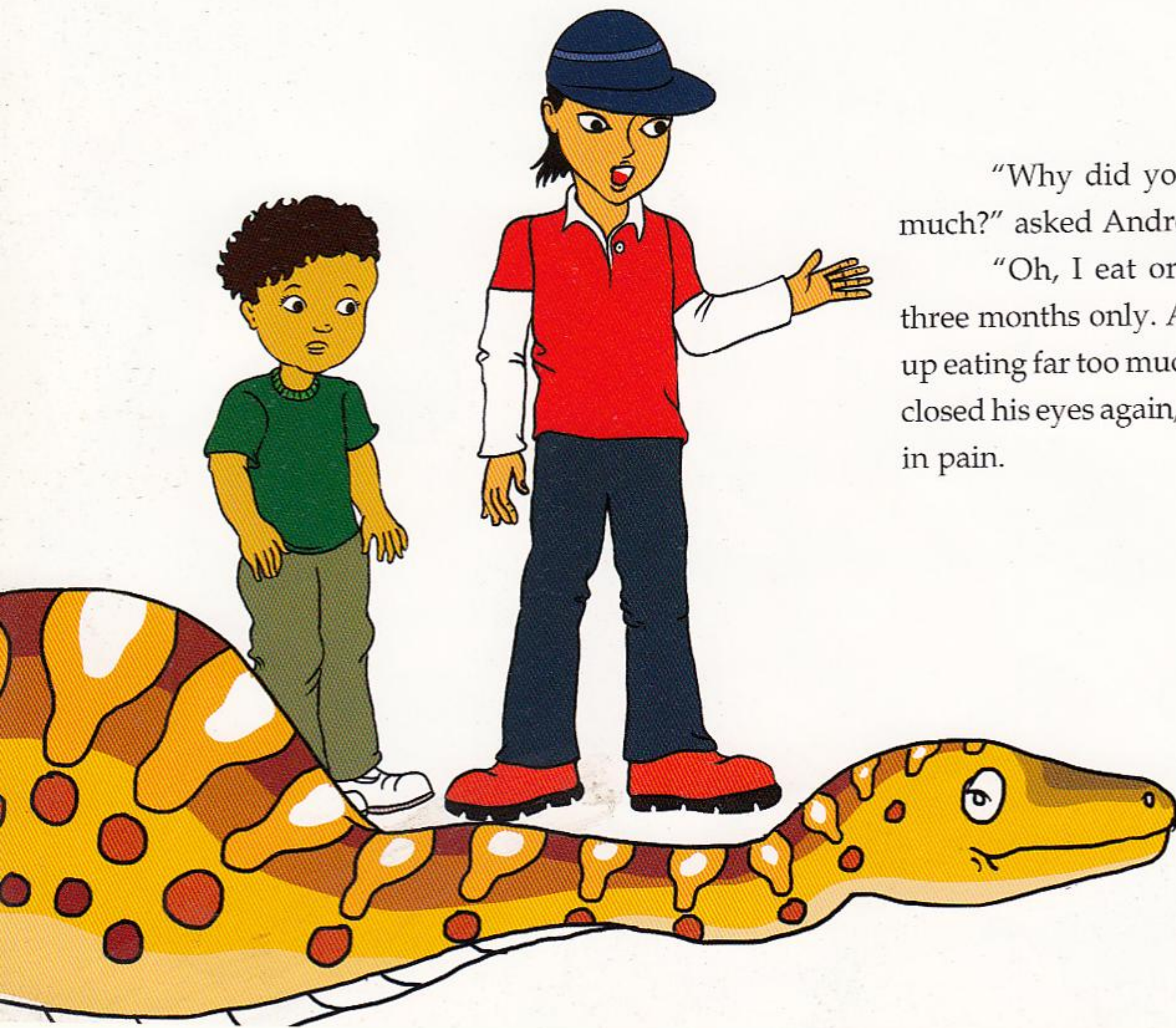
But there was no answer. They decided to call him Spots, as he had large brown spots all over his long body. They went closer still.

"Spots! Are you all right?" called out Reuben.

Spots opened his eyes, looked at them both and moaned, "Go away. I have a bad stomach ache. I ate too much."

Reuben, still rather afraid of Spots, asked cautiously, "Did you eat any children?"

To his relief, Spots replied, "Of course not! That is just a rumour. It helps keep naughty children away from me. In any case, you seem to be good boys and you don't need to be afraid of me."



"Why did you eat too much?" asked Andrew.

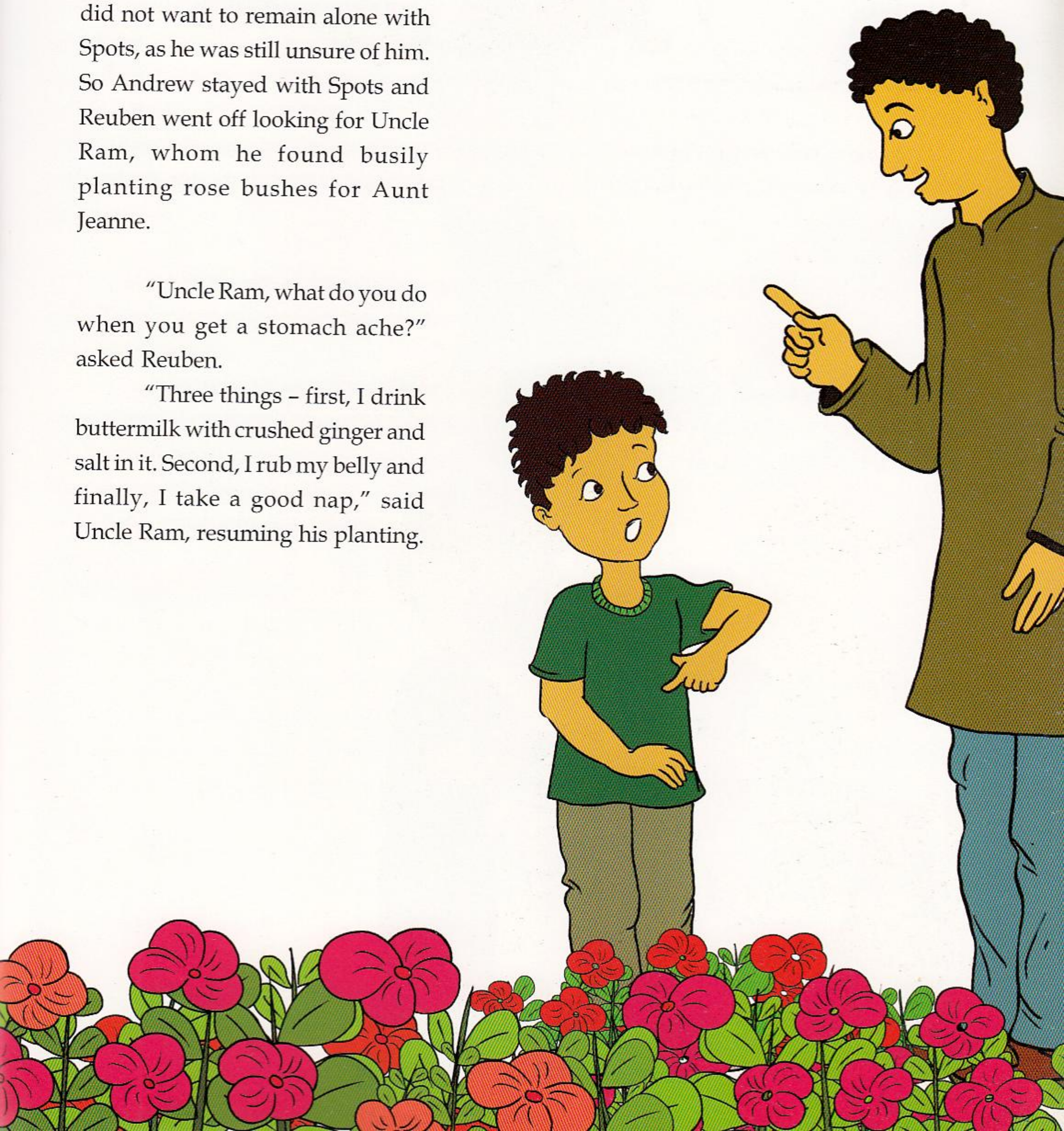
"Oh, I eat once every three months only. And I end up eating far too much." Spots closed his eyes again, moaning in pain.



They did not know what to do. How do you treat someone with a stomach ache? They decided to seek Uncle Ram's advice. Reuben did not want to remain alone with Spots, as he was still unsure of him. So Andrew stayed with Spots and Reuben went off looking for Uncle Ram, whom he found busily planting rose bushes for Aunt Jeanne.

"Uncle Ram, what do you do when you get a stomach ache?" asked Reuben.

"Three things - first, I drink buttermilk with crushed ginger and salt in it. Second, I rub my belly and finally, I take a good nap," said Uncle Ram, resuming his planting.



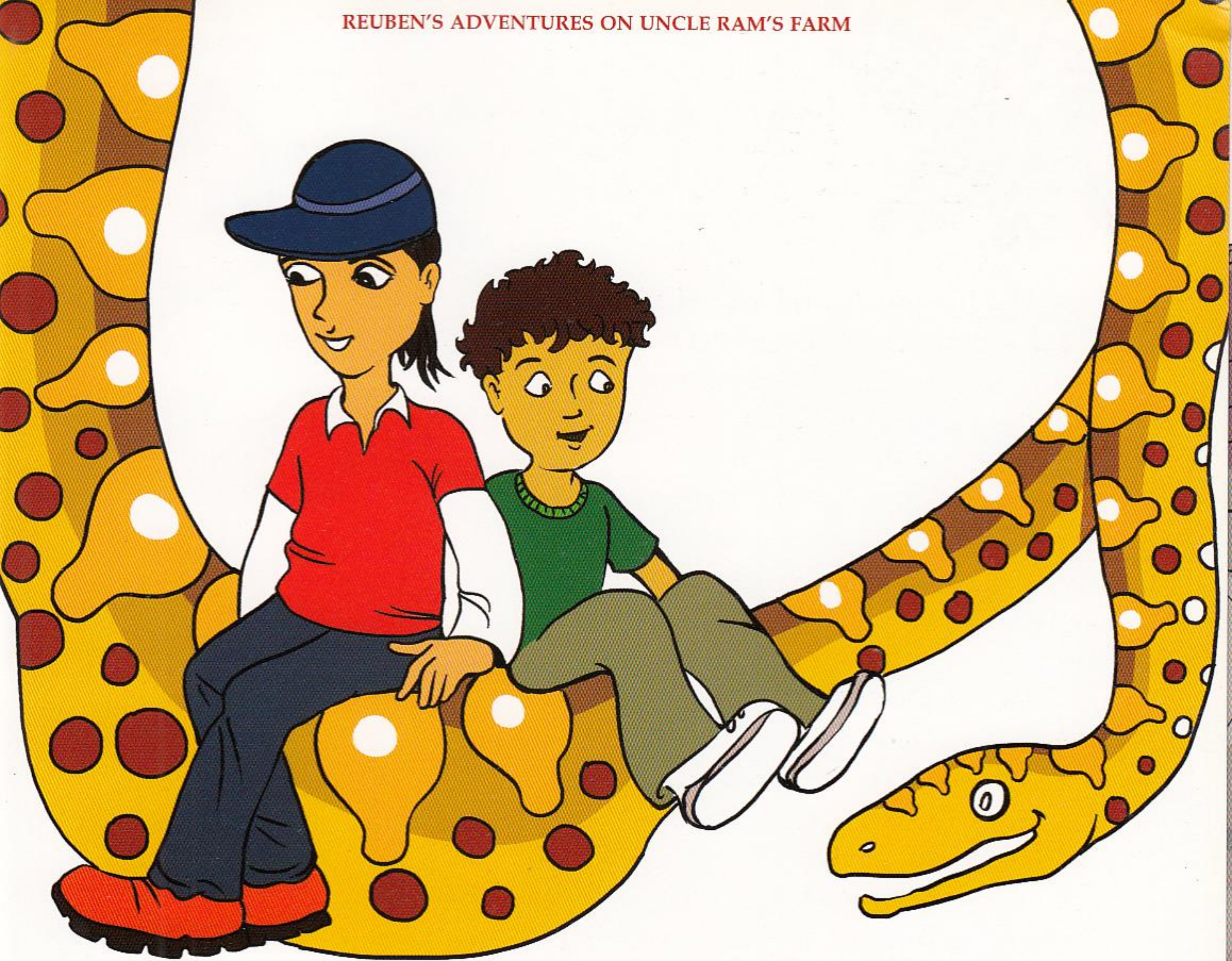


Reuben went into the house and found a jug of butter milk. He crushed some ginger with salt and mixed it into the buttermilk in the jar. When he got back with the jug, Andrew woke Spots up.

Spots smelled the jar and did not want to drink what was in it. Reuben encouraged him saying, "It is good for you. You will feel better afterwards."

But Spots would not open his mouth. What could they do now? Andrew decided to stretch open and hold Spot's mouth open while Reuben poured in the drink. Spots had no choice but to gulp it down.

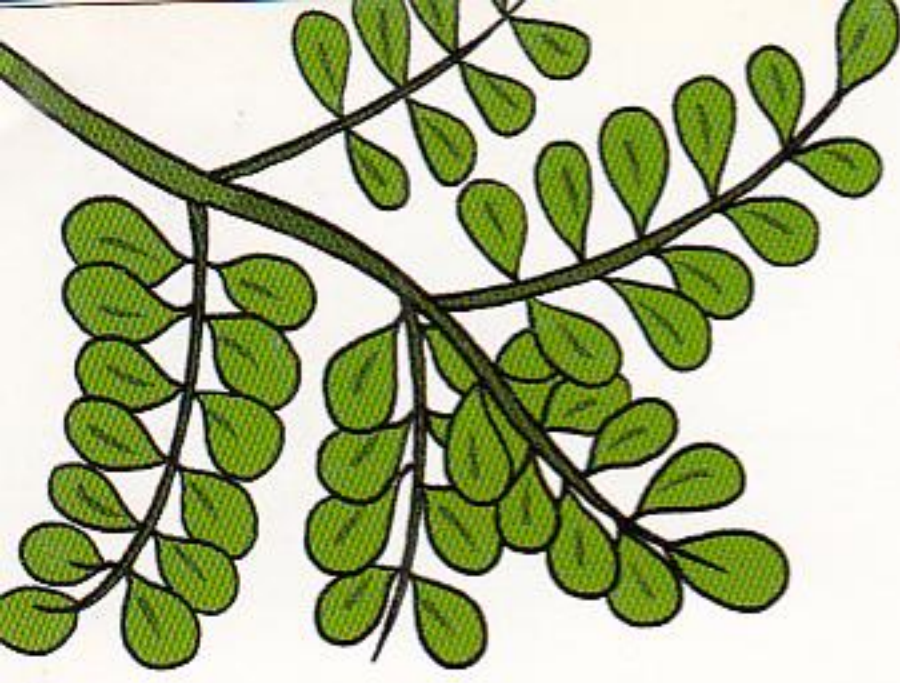




The bulge was still there. Now, how could they rub his belly? Andrew had an idea. They asked Spots to climb onto the branch of the Guava tree. Then they made sure that both his head and tail were curled tightly around the branch. They then asked Spots to lower his body in the middle to form a big U, like a swing. The bulge was exactly in the middle.

Andrew helped Reuben climb on to Spots and hold on firmly. Then Andrew gave a big push. It was like pushing a swing, but a bouncy one. Spots stretched up and down like an elastic band.

"Mmm..., that feels good," sighed Spots. "But I need more weight. Andrew, why don't you get on me as well?"



So, Andrew climbed onto Spots as well. Reuben and Andrew went back and forth, up and down. It was a jolly ride for them. Spots felt good too. He then took a nap.



After sometime, the bulge slowly disappeared. Andrew and Reuben got off and Spots woke up feeling fine. He slid down the tree and approached Reuben and Andrew. He coiled his long body around them both and gave them a hug. "Thank you both! How can I repay you?"

"We would love to play with you any time, but could you promise not to hurt anyone in this village, including the farm animals?"

Spots agreed. He went away promising to return soon.

The villagers who witnessed this were most impressed and grateful to Andrew and Reuben. They presented Andrew with a flute and Reuben with a harmonium. The cousins became the favourite children of the whole village.



Reuben Picks A Puppy

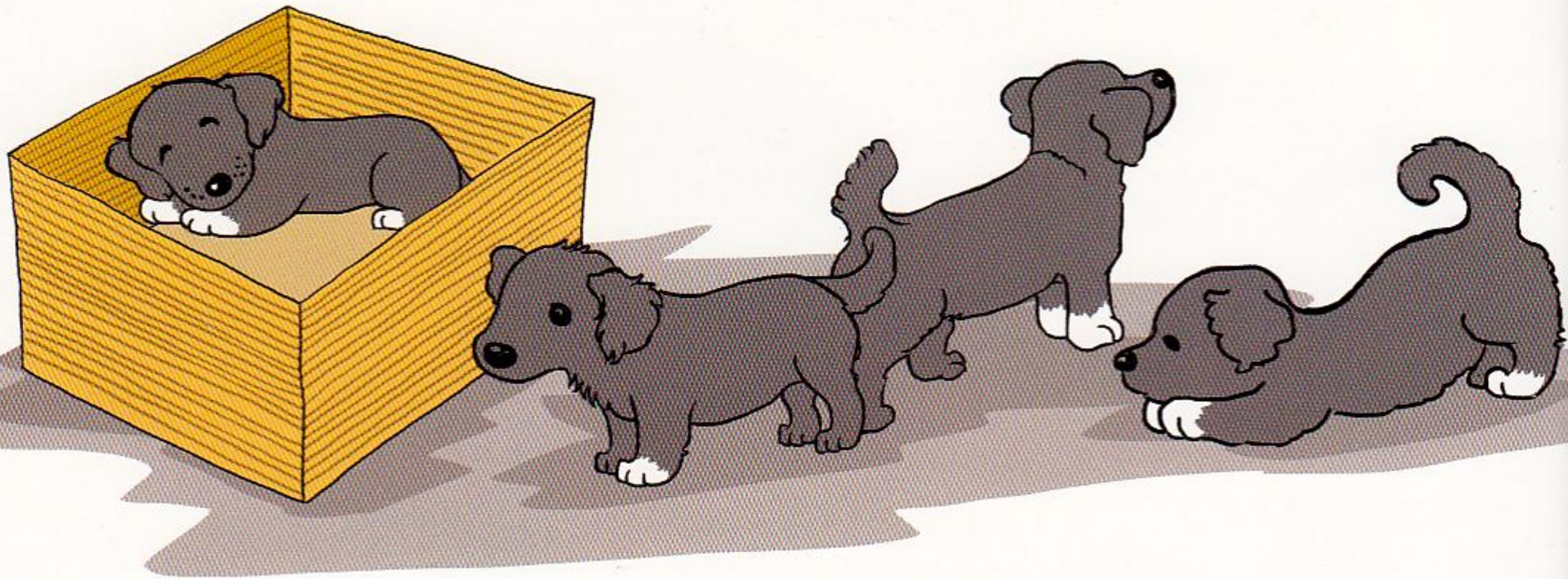


One day during his vacation at Uncle Ram's farm, Reuben found his pet elephant Lakshmi, suffering from a toothache. They got Lakshmi some medicine from the vet and let her rest. But Lakshmi was bored as she could not move around much. Reuben tried reading her stories but that did not help Lakshmi's restlessness. Reuben then thought a surprise present might cheer her up.

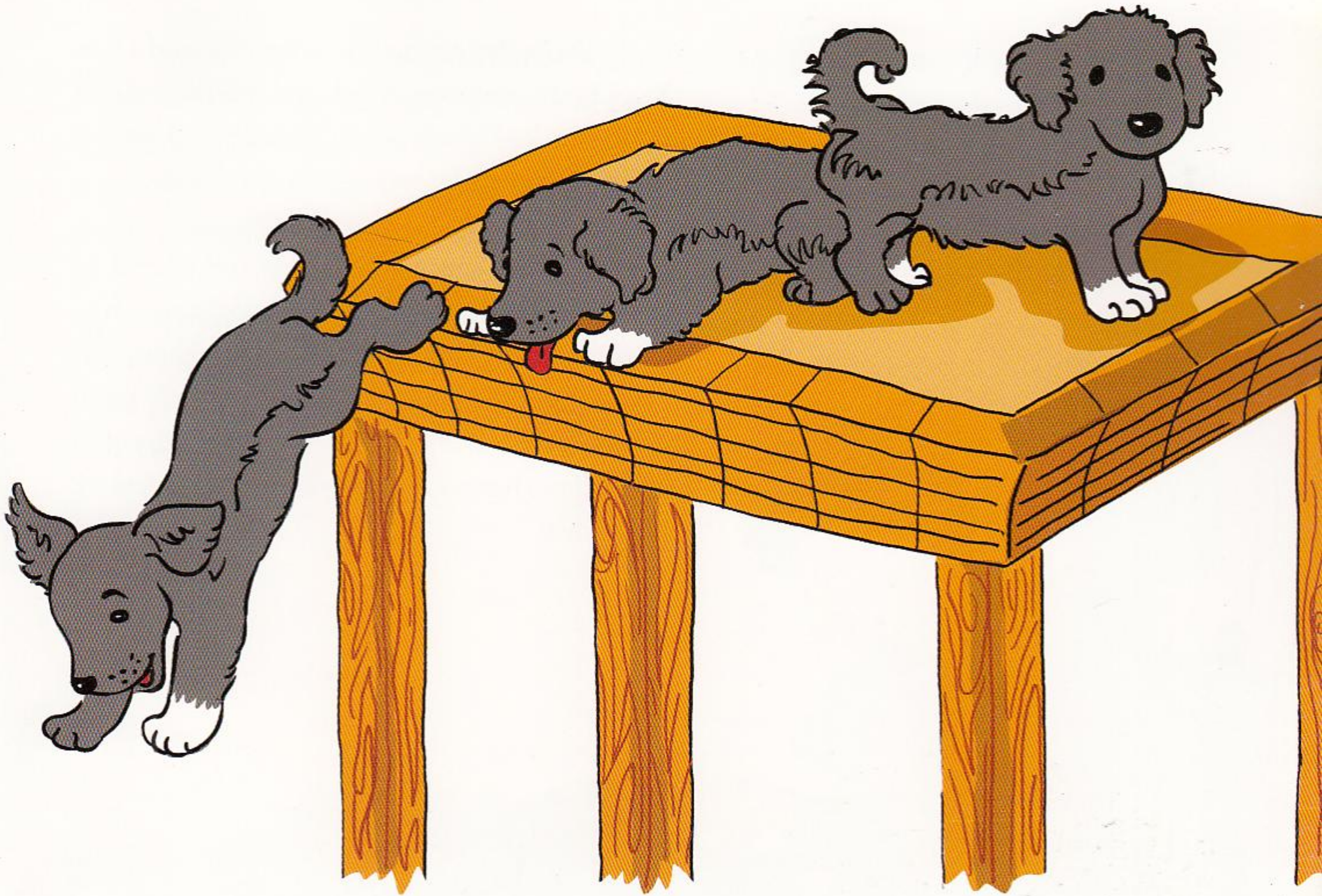
He remembered that his friend Gowri had mentioned last week that her dog had given birth to a litter of puppies recently. Reuben called her up and asked if there were any of the pups left and if he could have one for Lakshmi.

Gowrie replied, "I have four left Reuben, and you can pick any of them for Lakshmi."

When Lakshmi finally went to sleep, Uncle Ram drove Reuben to Gowri's house. The puppies were so cute and just a month old. All of them were black with a white patch on the throat. They all looked the same except for their paws – the first puppy had one white paw; the second had two white paws; the third puppy had three white paws and the last one had all four paws white. Reuben was so confused! How could he pick One-Paw, Two-Paws, Three-Paws or Four-Paws? Which one would play with Lakshmi?



Reuben put all four puppies in a corner of the house and built a cardboard barrier to keep them inside. He waited to see which one would climb over the foot-high wall. All the puppies tried to do so several times. But just as they were about to cross over the wall, they would fall back. After a few attempts, One-Paw, Two-Paws and Three-Paws made it, while Four-Paws did not. Four-Paws simply lay down and went to sleep. Certainly, Four-Paws would not do, since he gave up so easily!



So, One-Paw, Two-Paws and Three-Paws would be able to climb over Lakshmi with no problem, Reuben thought. But would they be able to jump off Lakshmi?

Reuben put One-Paw, Two-Paws and Three-Paws on a table three feet high. The three puppies ran around the small table peering over the edge. They would then back away to the centre of the table. Reuben waited to see who would make the move. One-Paw and Two-Paws went towards the edge of the table; jumped off with no problem but Three-Paws just stayed safely in the centre. Certainly Three-Paws would not do since he was afraid of heights!

Now there remained One-Paw and Two-Paws to choose from. Which one should he pick? Reuben asked Uncle Ram "Could you help me decide between One-Paw and Two-Paws?"

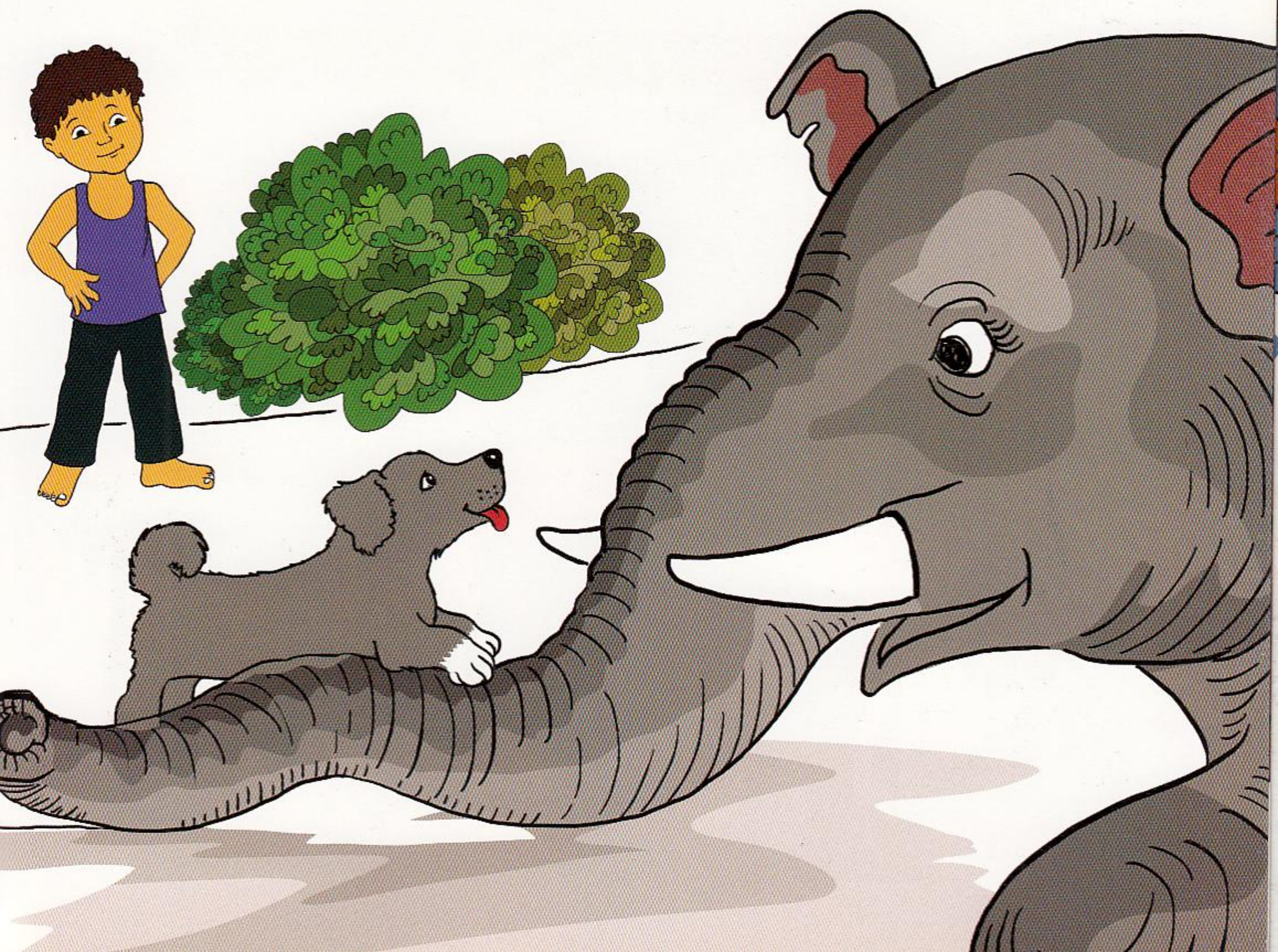
Uncle Ram extended his right hand to One-Paw and his left hand to Two-Paws. One-Paw snuggled against Uncle Ram's hand, but Two-Paws gave a little bark and bit Uncle Ram. It was not much of a bite, as Two-Paw was little and did not have any teeth yet. But he obviously had spirit!



Uncle Ram immediately said, "Let's take Two-Paws with us." Reuben decided to name him Moti. They thanked Gowri and went home, carrying the little pup in a small box.

When they got home, Lakshmi was still asleep. Reuben placed Moti beside her. Moti, seeing an elephant for the very first time, ran around Lakshmi without making a sound. Then he climbed onto her trunk. Lakshmi felt the pup tickling her and moved her trunk. Immediately Moti fell over. But he did not cry out – he just got up and climbed on again. Lakshmi felt the tickle again and moved her trunk once more. Moti fell over.

The next time, Moti climbed up faster and managed to reach all the way to the top before Lakshmi shook him off. Moti had had enough. He gave a little short, sharp bark to wake her up. Lakshmi opened her eyes and was surprised to see a cute puppy looking right into her eyes.



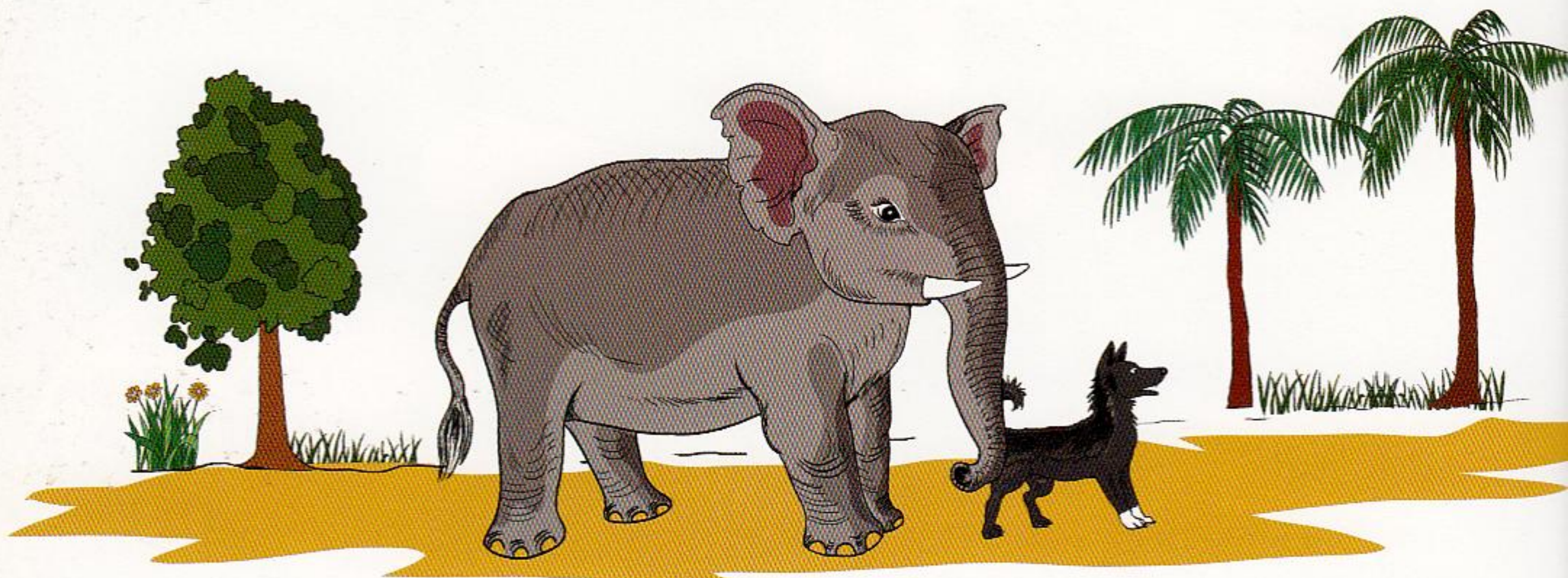
Reuben introduced them, "Lakshmi, this is your new playmate, Moti."

Lakshmi, who never had any playmates before, was thrilled. She playfully shook her head and Moti fell off – only to climb back again. This became a game with them. Lakshmi would sit up with her trunk hanging down like a slide. Moti would climb up and slide down. Playing with Moti, her new friend, Lakshmi forgot all about her tooth ache.

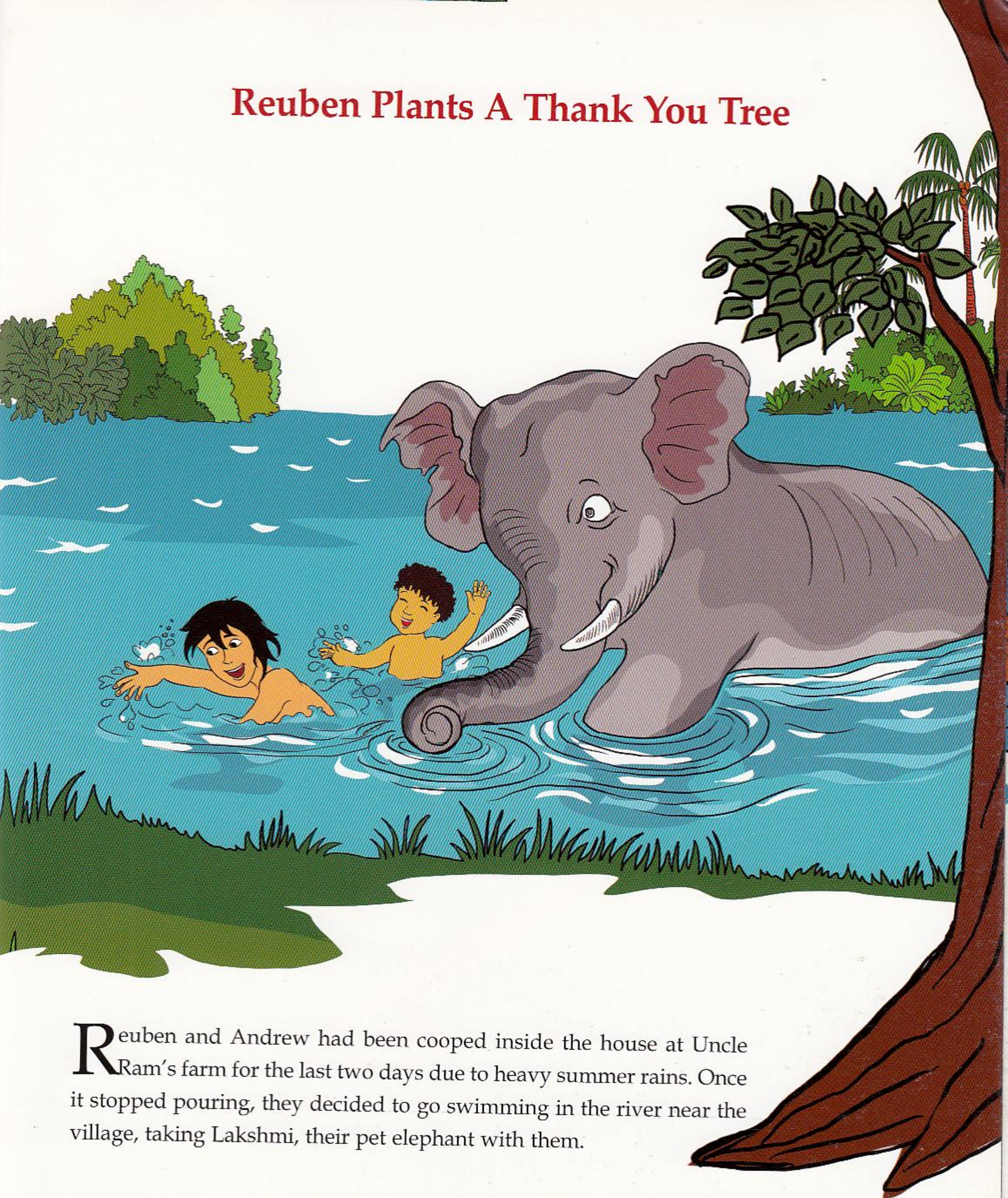
Reuben reported back to Uncle Ram "I was afraid Moti would bite Lakshmi, but they are getting along just fine. Thanks for helping to pick a puppy. But, Uncle Ram, why did you pick Moti, who bit you and not One-Paw, who cuddled lovingly?"

Uncle Ram smiled and replied, "Eventually, both would have loved Lakshmi. But Moti is defiant and unafraid of strangers. He will be able to protect Lakshmi like a true friend ought to – with his bark and his bite."

Indeed, as Moti grew up, he became not only a friend but also a protector for Lakshmi. Whenever Lakshmi went to sleep, Moti would lie close to her. No stranger could approach Lakshmi without getting past Moti. If anyone came close, they could count on a bark and a bite from Moti – until they were admitted into their circle of friends.



Reuben Plants A Thank You Tree



Reuben and Andrew had been cooped inside the house at Uncle Ram's farm for the last two days due to heavy summer rains. Once it stopped pouring, they decided to go swimming in the river near the village, taking Lakshmi, their pet elephant with them.

Upstream, the river was not very deep and safer, whereas downstream, there were many rocks and water rapids. The boys picked a shallow spot and had fun swimming between the banks while Lakshmi had a bath and squirted them all with fountains of water. After a while, Andrew got cramps and decided to rest. He pulled himself up onto the bank and sat down to watch Reuben playing with Lakshmi.

Suddenly, Andrew heard a distant roar, but he was not sure what it was. He noticed that Lakshmi had become tense, sensing something was wrong.

Andrew shouted a warning to Reuben, "You should probably stop and get out of the water".

By then the roar had become very loud. What could it be? Suddenly, Andrew realized what it was - a flash flood - when the river was suddenly flooding with huge amounts of rain water.

He cried out in alarm, "Reuben! Get out NOW!"





Lakshmi tried to grab Reuben, but it was too late. Reuben was swept away in the torrent of water. Lakshmi ran after Reuben but she could only move very slowly in the water.

How were they to rescue Reuben? The river curved through the village in an U shape. Andrew thought he could run across and catch Reuben at the other end. He had no time to lose! Andrew started running, forgetting all about his cramps. He was the fastest runner in his class and soon he was at the other end of the U bend. He could see Reuben's head above the water in the distance but not Lakshmi. What was he to do now? Andrew found a long branch on the ground and pulled it to the river's edge and lowered it into the rushing water.





Meanwhile, Reuben was having an *upsy-downsy* time in the flowing water. When his head went under, he held his breath till he came up again. The river had slowed down around the bend but was picking up speed once again. Reuben then saw Andrew with the tree branch – maybe he could try and grab it! He started swimming towards Andrew, who edged closer to the water, extending the branch as far as it would go. Reuben reached out and finally got hold of the branch. But the force of the water was too great for Andrew to hold on. He lost his balance and fell into the water! Now they were both in the water, holding onto the branch, but being swept away!

Reuben and Andrew locked their arms together and around the branch. Were they getting closer to the rapids? They could hear Lakshmi's cries, but she was too far behind them. Who was going to help them now?

Then they saw a huge water buffalo ahead, standing on a rock. He was shiny black and looked majestic with his long horns. Seeing their plight, the water buffalo waded into the water towards them. He locked horns with the branch and began pulling Andrew and Reuben hanging on to the branch, towards the shore. They reached the bank and were finally safe.



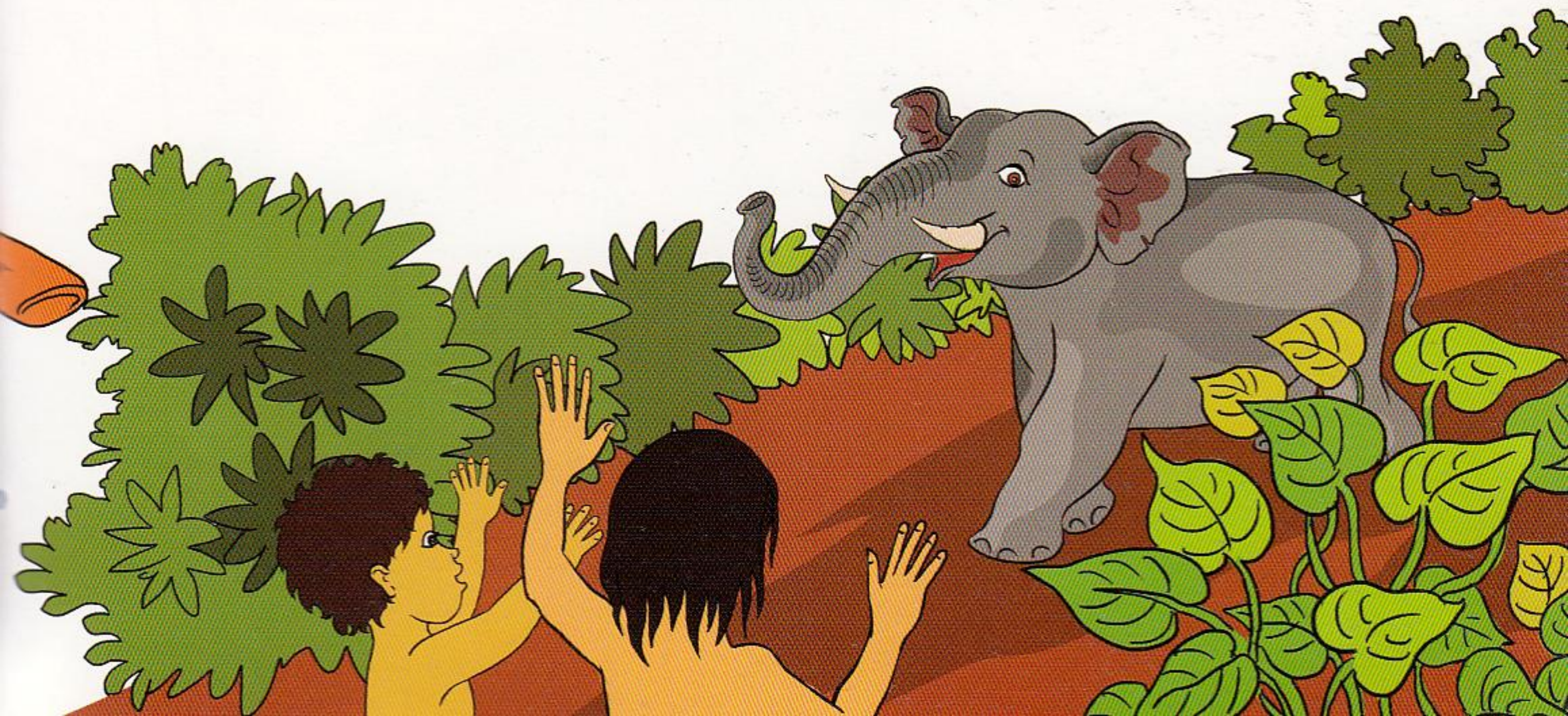
When they got out, of the rushing water, Reuben and Andrew collapsed onto the ground and lay flat on their backs with their eyes closed trying to catch their breath.



Finally, Reuben said, "Thanks Andrew! I don't know what I would have done without your help."

"That is all right," replied Andrew. "You would have done the same for me. It is the water buffalo we must both thank, for saving our lives!"

They looked around to thank the water buffalo, but he was nowhere to be seen. Where had he gone? In a few minutes, Lakshmi came up to them running -obviously glad to see them both safe. Reuben and Andrew rode Lakshmi back to the farm.



Reuben told Uncle Ram about their adventure and how brave Andrew had been – and how the water buffalo had saved them but mysteriously vanished before they could thank him.

“Why did he go away before we could thank him? Was he shy?” wondered Reuben.

“Maybe the water buffalo just wanted to help you and did not expect any thanks,” said Uncle Ram.

“Oh, but we owe a big THANK YOU to him! I just feel awful that we did not have the chance to thank him. How can we thank him if he isn’t there?”

“Well,” Uncle Ram thought for a moment, “you could plant a Thank You Tree.”

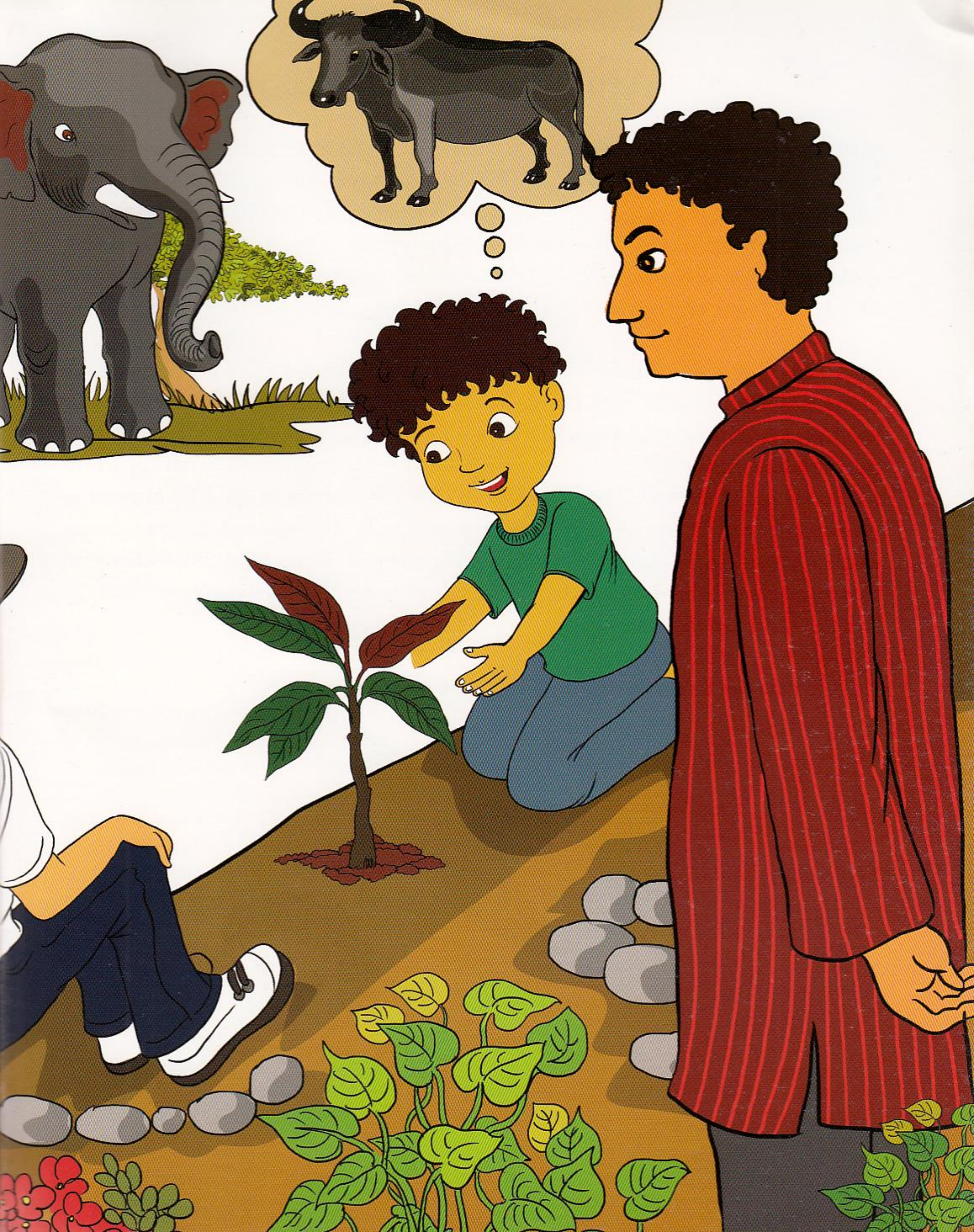
“What is a Thank You Tree?” asked Reuben puzzled.

“When you owe big thanks to someone, you plant your favourite fruit tree. Every time you eat its fruit, you remember and thank them.”

Reuben loved mangoes. With Uncle Ram’s help, Reuben planted a mango Thank You Tree in the Rock Garden.

He thought to himself “Mr. Water Buffalo. I know we will meet again someday, when I will thank you properly. But till then, I will settle for the Thank You Tree... and the mangoes.”





ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

SUHITA MITRA was born in Kohima, Nagaland – a region of untouched, natural beauty. Wherever the eye travelled, there were hills, trees, flowers and wildlife. Gardens were filled with radiant blooms and vibrant greens. Television was still unknown and all that young children had to amuse them was the enchantment offered by the gardens, the playing fields and books...lots of story books. Such an environment was a natural nursery for the imagination, especially on cloudy and grey days when it rained and rained...

After her schooling, Suhita joined the National Institute Of Design, Ahmedabad. The untrammelled ways of using her imagination, fostered by her childhood environment, suddenly found meaningful and fulfilling channels through art appreciation, photography, freehand drawing, animation and typography. Suhita graduated from NID with a penchant for stories and story-telling. With her love of nature and children, she feels inspired to give back all that she has received through her work as an illustrator and designer. Giving shape to ideas, whether her own or someone else's, brings her immense joy. Her background in animation also helps support her enthusiasm in bringing alive the written word through design, colour and illustrations.

Suhita can be reached at: suhita.mitra@gmail.com



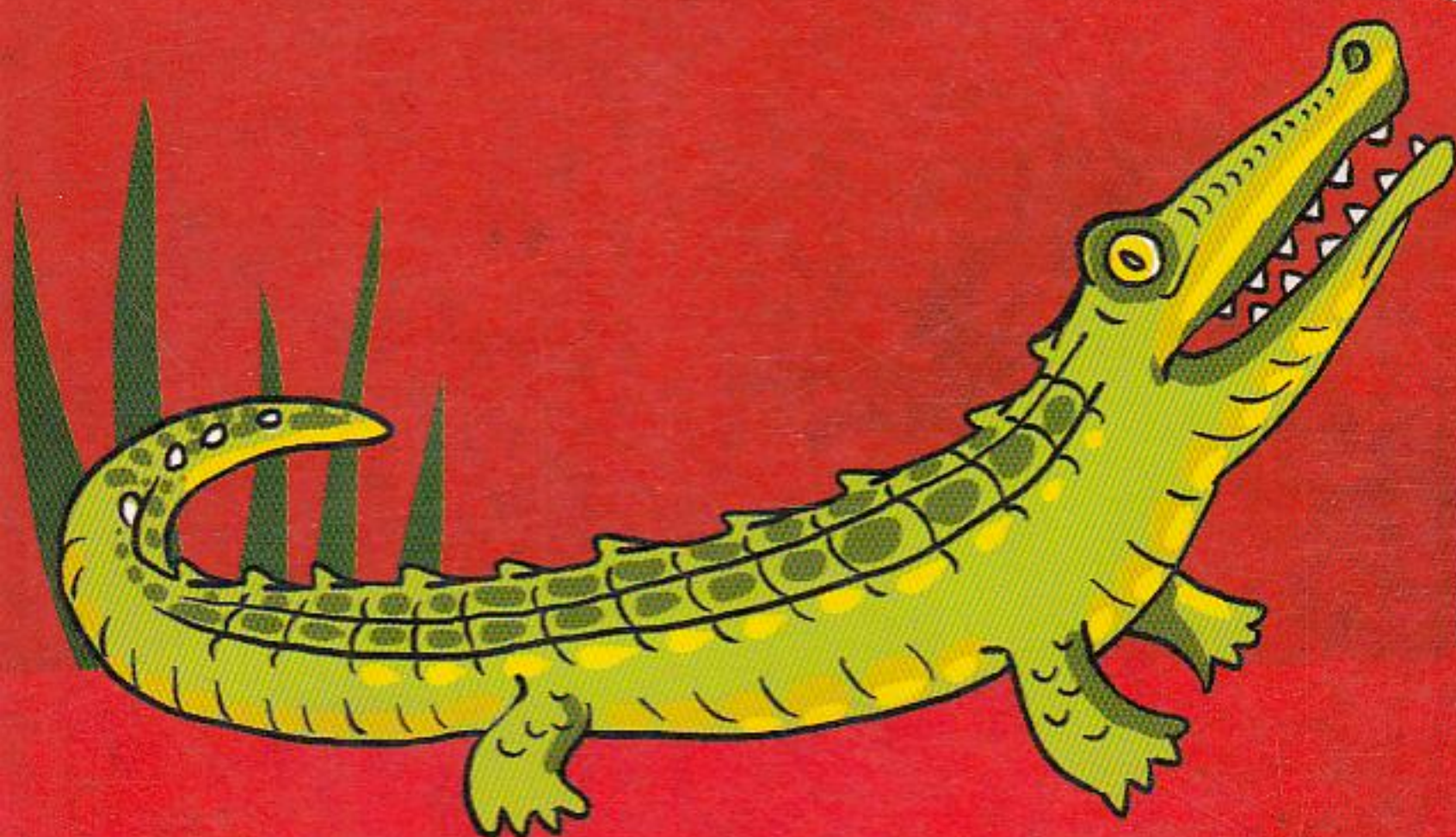
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When five-year-old Reuben visits his Uncle Ram's farm near Bangalore, in India, he has a small adventure and meets Lakshmi, the elephant, whom he adopts as a friend and pet. But he cannot take Lakshmi back to the United States with him on a plane, so he leaves her behind at Uncle Ram's farm, promising to return every year.

Reuben's next round of adventures brings him two more friends – Ali, the crocodile and Moti, the dog. He also discovers that these animals talk to children all the time. You only have to listen!

Reuben's older cousin Andrew, also visits the farm and together the cousins have other encounters with more animals – each one exciting and memorable. With each adventure, they gain new friends and learn something along the way.



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